

BEADLE

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The Border Robin Hood; OR, THE PRAIRIE ROVER.

BY BUFFALO BILL,
AUTHOR OF "THE PHANTOM SPY," "DEADLY
EYE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN.

THE lingering rays of the setting sun tinged the western horizon with crimson glory, and burnished up the gilt cross upon the steeple of an ivy-clad church, situated upon the banks of the lower Mississippi, until it looked like pure gold in the rosy light of day.

Into the portals of the church was moving a solemn and melancholy procession, following the cold form of some departed friend who had gone from life to join the departed hosts in the village of the dead, for around the humble structure were sleeping many who had passed away.

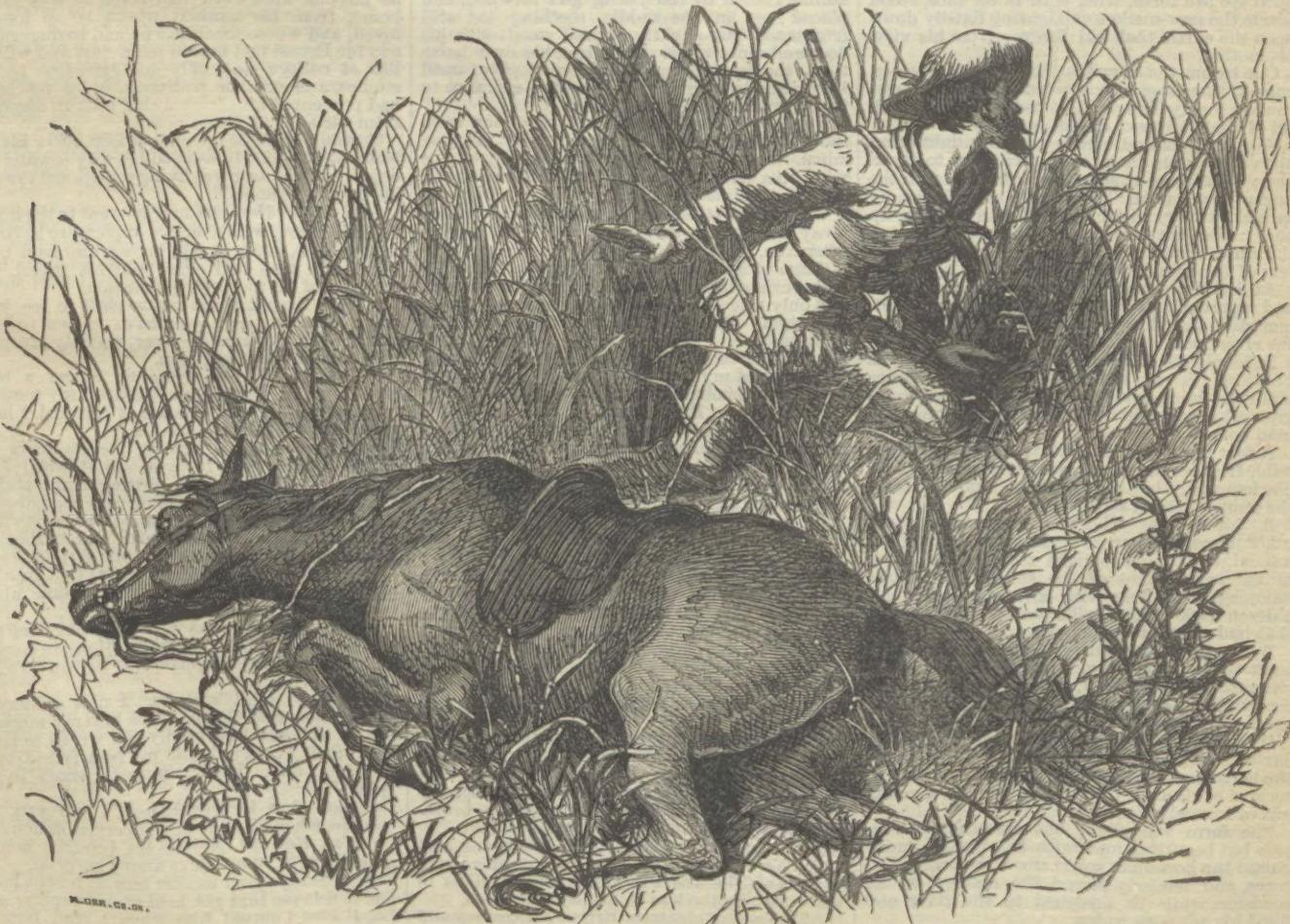
In the churchyard an open grave stood ready to embrace within its clayey arms the one whom soon it was to forever hide from mortal view, and ever and anon the deep notes of the tolling bell would burst mournfully forth, trilling dirge-like, as it echoed along, over river, woodland and meadow, until the sound died away upon the balmy evening air.

With melancholy cadence the sound of the tolling bell fell upon the ears of a horseman, who was slowly wending his way adown the river road, which led by the little church, and a look of sorrow would sweep across his hand-

some face, the next moment to give place to a frown as some internal feeling of bitterness brought a half-smothered curse to his lips.

Both horse and rider were travel-stained and weary, as though they had journeyed far since sunrise; still, the horseman sat erect in his saddle, his elegant, agile form swaying gracefully with the movements of his steed. His face, though fatigued-looking, was one of striking appearance, but there rested in his handsome dark eyes and upon the finely-molded mouth an expression of recklessness and bitterness, evidently brought there by a life of wild dissipation, although he was scarcely more than of age, and his upper lip was barely shaded by the down of manhood.

As the tolling notes of the bell again smote upon his ears, the horseman, with an exclamation of impatience, urged his horse forward at a more rapid pace, and ere long, drew rein be-



A WORD TO HIS FAITHFUL STEED CAUSED HIM TO SINK QUICKLY DOWN IN THE TALL PRAIRIE GRASS.

fore the churchyard, where now stood the sexton, leaning upon his spade.

A glance of recognition passed between the two, a look that changed to surprise upon the sexton's face, as he said, bluntly:

"Well, Master Ernest, you are just in time to be at the funeral; but who could have believed you would dare come home?"

"I dare do anything, Ben Baldwin; but who is it that is dead?" the young man asked, in an indifferent tone.

"What you do not know, then, that your murder of your cousin Howard was the death of your poor mother?"

Like a drunken man the horseman reeled in his saddle, and then springing to the ground, advanced toward the sexton, his face blanched white, his lips quivering, as he cried:

"Ben, do not deceive me, but tell me, is my mother dead?"

The voice was deeply sad, and the sexton replied, with some feeling of pity:

"I tell the truth, Master Ernest; yonder bell is tolling for her funeral."

With a groan from his inmost heart the young man heard the news, and then, with firm, rapid step, he entered the door of the church and strode down the aisle, toward the spot where rested the coffin and its dead.

Every eye was upon him, and several would have barred his way, but they shrank back before the gleaming eyes of the young man, who, undisputed moved on, until, with a heart-rending moan, he sunk down upon his knees, and rested his arms and head upon the casket, crying, in a deep, and mournful voice:

"My poor, poor mother! It is I, your son, your wicked boy, that has brought you here!"

In solemn voice the funeral services were continued by the minister, the conscience-upbraided man still kneeling beside the coffin, then the pall-bearers advanced to carry the body to the grave.

A touch upon the arm, and the young man arose, and quietly took his place behind the coffin, following it with slow tread and hard face up the aisle, and into the churchyard, and to the side of the yawning grave.

A short while longer, and the services were over, and those in attendance turned away, but not without casting many strange glances back upon the tall form, who, with bitter face, stood beside the new-made tomb, gazing fixedly down upon the earth that hid forever from his view his mother.

One by one the crowd departed to their homes, none of them speaking a word to the silent, sorrowing, lonely man, who seemed wholly unmindful of their presence and departure.

Slowly daylight died away, and twilight crept upon the earth, to in turn give way to darkness; a darkness of short duration, for soon the moon arose from her cloudland couch and spread a silvery luster over all, brightening up once more the cross upon the spire, and causing the white marble tombs to look like grim specters of the departed dead.

At last the young man turned slowly away, and approaching his patiently-waiting steed, mounted and slowly continued his way along the river road.

Suddenly the sound of rapidly-advancing hoofs broke on his ear, and the next instant a horse and rider came in sight, the animal urged to his greatest speed, and still lashed cruelly as with mad bounds he rushed on.

A few more bounds, and the steed uttered a wild, frightened scream, which was echoed by one less shrill, but more human, and instantly the animal's speed slackened.

A few savage yelps and angry growls, another almost-human cry from the struggling animal, and the moonlight revealed the cause of the rapid flight of the steed, upon whose haunches now clung with savage tenacity half a dozen dark forms—wild wolves of the forest that had chased him to his doom.

Instinctively the lonely horseman forgot his sorrows, and spurring forward, dashed upon the scene, while rapidly, with ringing crack after crack, his revolver flashed forth, startling again the silence of land and river.

Driven from their prey, the ravenous wolves darted away to seek cover in the forest, while the horseman dismounting rushed forward to receive in his arms the fainting form of a young girl of scarcely eighteen.

The form was slight but graceful, the face pale but beautiful, and with admiration undisguised the horseman gazed upon the lovely features, and tenderly placed the maiden by the roadside, while he hastened to the river and filled his hat with water.

A short while, and the beautiful eyes were

opened, a sigh parted the ruby lips, and consciousness returned.

"Ah! where am I? I have had such a terrible dream!"

"Lady, it liked not to have been a dream, but a fearful reality; but you are safe now, and I would see you home, if you will allow me," kindly said the horseman.

An instant the maiden gazed into the sad, handsome face of the man before her, and then said:

"I remember now: I was returning home, when I was chased by wolves, and you saved me from a fearful death."

"I was so fortunate; but it is late now, and we had better hasten. Though I once lived near here, I do not recognize in yours a familiar face."

"No, sir; my father has lately purchased the Riverdale plantation; I am Miss Reginald."

"Indeed! I have often heard your beauty spoken of—pardon me—my mother has written me of the purchase of the Riverdale plantation, and of your father, your brother and yourself, Miss Reginald."

"I believed I had met all of the neighboring gentry, sir, but in you I fail to recognize an acquaintance, though, after this night, you shall ever have a warm place in my heart as a friend; can I ask your name, sir?"

The face of the young horseman flushed crimson in the moonlight, then turned deadly pale, as he remarked, after a moment's hesitation:

"Miss Reginald, my name will bring to you no pleasant memories, for well I know that it is bandied about with crime and dishonor. Suffice it, then, to kindly remember one who has saved your life, no longer than the present moment, for he is unworthy of a longer remembrance."

The maiden glanced with surprise into the handsome face of the man before her, and as if pitying him, unknowingly she drew nearer, and laying her hand gently upon his arm, replied tenderly:

"One who has saved my life, sir, shall ever hold a dear place in my heart; but surely you can never have been guilty of crime."

"Miss Reginald, I have grievously sinned against God and man; but tarry not longer here, or your friends will be anxious regarding you."

Instantly turning away, the horseman led the animal ridden by the young girl forward, and placed her in the saddle, soothing the still frightened, but slightly injured steed with his deep and quiet voice. Mounting his own horse then, the two rode off at a quick pace, until they came to a large gateway—the entrance to the Riverdale plantation home.

Here they drew rein, and the horseman said, sadly: "Miss Reginald, here I will bid you adieu. For fear you will think kindly of one who does not deserve it, I will tell you that I am Ernest Maltravers."

Without another word the horseman turned away, leaving the surprised maiden still gazing after him, while she murmured:

"Ernest Maltravers? can it be he whose wild and reckless life has broken his mother's heart, and only a few short weeks ago took the life of his cousin? Surely his face is not the index to a guilty soul."

"Well, be he crime-stained and Cain-accursed, he has saved my life, and shall ever be remembered with kindness."

Thus saying, Ruth Reginald rode on, and a few minutes more brought her to the door of her lordly home, where she was welcomed by her father and mother, who, in dismay, heard the story of her narrow escape, and the name of the man who had been her preserver.

CHAPTER II.

BRANDED WITH CRIME.

ERNEST MALTRAVERS was the only child of a widowed mother, who, at the death of her husband, had been left a plantation home upon the banks of the Mississippi river, and sufficient wealth to live in luxury.

Proud of her handsome boy, Mrs. Maltravers had humored his every whim, until he grew up, a wild and reckless youth, unrestrained by fear of man or law.

Of a generous nature, Mrs. Maltravers had, when Ernest was in his sixteenth year, adopted her nephew, the son of a brother of her husband, and at once between the two cousins, Ernest and Howard, had sprung up a warm, brotherly attachment, for, in spite of his wild life, the young planter had a noble heart, and had urged his mother to send for his cousin as soon as he heard he was left alone and penniless in the world, by the loss of his parents at sea.

At the age of eighteen, Ernest Maltravers and Howard were sent to college in a northern State,

and from their crossing the threshold of the classic hall, the two youths became rivals in their studies and in all the athletic sports; still their friendly relations continued, until across their lives passed another and deeper shadow of rivalry, for Howard loved a young girl, who in turn did not love him, but bestowed her affections upon Ernest, for she was a selfish woman of the world, young as she was, and soon knew the heir of the Maltravers estate from the dependent upon an aunt's bounty.

Whether Ernest returned the love of the maiden, or delighted in her society merely for the enjoyment of a flirtation, none of his fellow-students knew; but, at any rate, Howard became jealous of his cousin for awhile; and then, changing his manner once more, was as friendly as ever toward him.

Thus time went on until one pleasant afternoon the two cousins went forth for a walk in the forest, and from this walk only Ernest ever returned alive to tell the horrible story of how he and Howard commenced an altercation, which grew more bitter until it ended in a challenge from his cousin, which, in the heat of anger, he accepted.

Without seconds the two cousins fought, facing each other at twenty paces, and at a word drawing and firing with their revolvers, which they had with them.

Both were splendid marksmen, and when Ernest had received a severe wound in the arm, he had in turn shot Howard through the heart.

Such was the story of Ernest Maltravers upon returning, faint and bleeding, to the college, and the finding of Howard's body, the revolver still clutched in his hand, the two empty chambers, and the whole appearance of the scene, corroborating the statement of the surviving cousin.

Still he was looked upon by the public as a murderer, and that night slept in a felon's cell.

Days passed away ere Ernest Maltravers was brought to trial, and the end of it was that the jury of his peers cleared him; for no other evidence could be found against him than what he had himself made known.

From the prison walls Ernest Maltravers came forth a changed man. No longer did he join his gay companions in the midnight revel, for he seemed like a stranger in a strange land, as not one kind word had come to him from home, from his mother, whom he so fondly loved, and whose teachings he had so disregarded; for Ernest had indeed led a fast and willful life at college, and only his attention to his studies, and extreme politeness to his teachers, had prevented him from being sent in disgrace from the halls of the university.

Turning his back upon his prison, after his release, Ernest slowly wended his way toward the depot, and ere long was flying southward toward his boyhood's home.

Arriving at New Orleans, he went to the hotel, and met there, with a degree of pleasure he could not disguise, one who had known him from boyhood, and who had ever been his friend, the overseer of his mother's plantation.

"Well, Ernest, I am really glad to see you; and what a fine man you have grown to be," said the kind-hearted overseer, warmly grasping the hand of the young man.

"Yes, Mr. Morton, I am no longer a boy; would to God I was—but what of my mother, for since my—my—the death of Howard, I have not heard one line from home."

"And no wonder, Ernest, for its doors are barred against you, for you see Howard Maltravers was continually writing home and to the neighbors, telling them of your mad dissipations, until the whole community were down on you, and it only needed the sad climax that followed to make them believe you a perfect fiend."

"What do you say, Mr. Morton? that Howard Maltravers wrote unkind reports home about me?"

"Continually he was writing about your fast company, gambling, and dissipations, in spite of his professed urgent entreaties to you to leave off your evil life."

"Strange, most strange. I now remember the coldness that slowly crept into my mother's letters, and yet how kindly she wrote to Howard. Still I believed him my best friend, until that fatal day. He was indeed a snake in the grass!"

"Just what he was, Ernest, I tell you, for, you see, when his body and papers came home—"

"Was Howard Maltravers brought home?" asked Ernest, in a tone of angry surprise.

"Certainly; your mother sent on for the body, and it was me that got hold of his papers; and, Lord! how I cursed him when I read how he had been in secret plotting against you."

"What could have been his object, Morton?"

"The Maltravers estate is a rich one, my boy, and—"

"Yes, I see all now—I see all; he lies in his grave in honor, and I live in dishonor. But Mr. Morton, when did you leave the plantation?"

"Some weeks ago, Ernest; for, you see, your mother and myself had a few words about Howard, who, I was sorry to see, had turned her against you, and I gathered together my traps, and here I am—a gentleman of leisure, and one to let."

"Mr. Morton, you must not suffer for this, and, believe me, all will come right. Now I must get me a horse, and at daylight in the morning I will leave for home."

Thus the two friends parted, and with bitterness in his heart, Ernest Maltravers set forth the following morning to visit once more the home of his boyhood.

The reader has seen how sadly he was disappointed in his welcome, for, ere he reached his plantation, he came full upon the funeral cortège of his mother, borne to an untimely grave, where, he felt, misrepresentation and calumny against her son had placed her.

True, he had been wild and wayward, and foolishly extravagant, but his conscience acquitted him of the damning crimes laid at his door by one whom he had loved as a brother, whose home had been his home, and whose purse had been his purse.

"Yes," he cried, as he rode on homeward, after leaving Ruth Reginald at the gateway leading to the Riverdale mansion, "yes, he poisoned the heart of my mother against me; yes, I see all now; and when he fell by my hand, it was looked upon as the crowning act of crime in my wretched life. Oh, my poor, dead mother, whose heart was broken by the reported infamy of your son! If you but knew my heart was true, you would look down from your throne on high, and forgive and bless your boy!"

Crushing back a groan of mortal agony, the lonely man rode on in silence for a few moments, and then continued, half aloud:

"Oh, how have I been deceived in one I loved as a brother! Hal! yonder looms up the church before me, and its shadow falls upon my mother's grave, and his!"

Turning his horse into the river highway, for in going to the Riverdale plantation, he had ridden back a mile into the country, Ernest rode up to the low fence surrounding the church, and, dismounting, advanced toward the spot where slept the bones of the Maltraverses for three generations.

Soon, with uncovered head, he knelt upon the damp, fresh earth, beside his mother's grave, and the moonlight gleaming full upon him, showed his face was white and stern.

Long he knelt there, with head bowed in silence, and then, rising, glanced furtively upon a glittering marble shaft a few yards distant.

Slowly he approached it, as if with dread, and while his face grew hard and bitter once more, read the inscription:

"Sacred to the Memory

OF

HOWARD MALTRAVERS,

Aged 22 years.

Died, May 1st, 18—.

Erected by his Adopted Mother."

"Great God! here lies beneath this marble tomb one whose life was a lie, and yet who is remembered in honor; and I, by whose hand he fell, am Cain-accursed and condemned in the eyes of those who were my friends, for Morton told me how I was hated by all, and even at my mother's grave I found not one hand to press mine in kindly sympathy."

"Yes, here lies the martyr, and I am the outcast. Ah, me! clouds surround me upon all sides, and the sunshine of my life has gone from me."

Sadly Ernest Maltravers turned from the graves of his mother and the one whose life he had taken, and, as if urged on by cruel memories, he bounded into his saddle, drove the spurs deep into his tired horse, and dashed adown the moonlit road at a rapid pace.

A ride of two miles brought him to a large gateway leading into a dense forest, through which glimmered a distant light, and toward this he directed his way, and soon drew up before a rambling and spacious mansion.

It was his boyhood's home, the birthplace of kindred generations before him; but no longer, as of yore, did lights blaze from the windows and doors, for the shadow of death was over all, and desolation, quietude and gloom reigned supreme.

A loud hail, and from the servants' wing of the mansion came forth a dark form and darker face, which Ernest appeared to recognize, for he called out:

"Well, Toby, this is a sad welcome to give the lord and master of Woodlawn."

"By de providence of de Lord, if it hain't Marse Ernest! Bless your soul, chile, I knows dat voice in de darkest night! How is you, Marse Ernest? and I's so glad to see you home onc'e more, kase de ole place ain't no place without you. Here, ole woman, gals, boys, git out of dat kitchen an' come welcome de boss!"

The kind welcome of the old negro-servant brought tears to the eyes of Ernest, and touched him to the heart, and he felt less alone in the world, as, in obedience to the call of old Toby, half a dozen of the family servants came forth and greeted him.

A half-hour more, and the lonely master of Woodlawn had partaken of a light repast, and in the solitude of his room was pacing to and fro, his bosom filled with conflicting emotions, and his brain a whirl of bitter thoughts, for Woodlawn seemed no longer the home of "auld lang syne" to him, for the faces and forms he had loved there, in years gone by, slept their last sleep in the churchyard on the river's bank.

CHAPTER III.

ERNEST MALTRAVERS'S CONFESSION.

FOR days after his return home, Ernest Maltravers never left the plantation limits, except to visit each evening at sundown the grave of his mother.

Many of the neighbors were wont to see him there as they passed by, but they set down his visits to remorse of conscience, and stories of his fast life at college being thoroughly believed, and his killing of his cousin, caused them to turn the cold shoulder to him, and those who had known him from boyhood were wont to pass him by without a look of recognition.

But though their conduct toward him at first cut Ernest to the heart, he soon became indifferent, and then daily became more stern and hard in his nature.

Twice had Judge Reginald and his son Ralph called at Woodlawn to see the lonely heir and thank him for the service rendered in saving Ruth from a terrible death, but each time Ernest had declined to see them, and thus he had never met the father and brother of the maiden whom he had never ceased to remember, since the eventful night of his return home.

As to his future course Ernest had not decided, for old Toby had informed him that it was rumored in the neighborhood that his mother had disinherited her only child, and left her entire property to charity; but of this Ernest was not assured, as the family lawyer had been called to a distant State to be absent several months, and until his return nothing would be known regarding the will.

"Surely, my good mother could not have been so embittered against me, Toby, as to take from me my rightful inheritance," said Ernest, sadly.

"Dunno, Marse Ernest; ole mistis mighty set ag'in' you when Marse Howard write to her you have your fast horses, and live wid a lady who wasn't your wife nohow; and he says, too, dat you hab hounds, and was throwin' money away at cards."

"Howard! Howard! how I was deceived in you! Well, time makes all things even, and I will face the worst with a bold front. Toby, bring my saddle-horse to the door."

A few moments after Ernest Maltravers was dashing along the river road leading to the churchyard, when suddenly he came full upon a stylish phaeton, which he was passing without a look at its occupants, and a sweet voice cried:

"Mr. Maltravers! oh! Mr. Maltravers!"

The first thought of Ernest was to dash by with a bow, but checking his determination, he drew rein alongside of the carriage, which had come to a halt, and raising his hat, bent low before Ruth Reginald, whose lovely face bore a joyous smile at again meeting him.

"Mr. Maltravers, I am delighted to again meet you, to thank you for my life, and to present to you my father and brother."

As Ruth spoke she extended her tiny gloved hand, which Ernest grasped as he glanced down into her lustrous eyes, and then turned his look upon Judge Reginald, a stately, fine-looking gentleman of fifty, and Ralph, a handsome young man of twenty-five.

"Miss Reginald, the pleasantest memory in my lonely life is that I was the humble instrument to save you from harm," replied Ernest, and then turning toward the gentlemen, he continued:

"Judge Reginald, I must ask you to pardon my seeming rudeness in declining to see yourself and son, when you called at Woodlawn; but, to speak plainly, I am ostracized in this neighborhood, and cared not to place you under the embarrassment of meeting one who was regarded with the aversion in which I am held in the community."

Ernest Maltravers spoke in a stern and bitter tone, and his words brought tears to Ruth's eyes, while both her father and brother were touched by his utter loneliness, and gazing into his handsome, noble face, felt that perhaps he had been condemned unjustly by the world.

"Mr. Maltravers, with your past life we have nothing to do; but with the present everything, for upon our happy home to-day would rest a gloomy shadow never to pass away, had not your courage saved my daughter from a death too terrible to dwell upon. Riverdale plantation you know, and there you shall ever be a welcome guest, even though the world bar its doors against you."

"Will you return with us to tea? Come, I ask it in good faith."

Ernest hesitated an instant, and then caught the eye of Ruth Reginald, who softly said:

"You will not refuse, Mr. Maltravers?" It was a beacon of hope held forth to the lonely man, and like a ray of sunshine breaking through the clouds, he could not but turn his gaze wistfully toward it, struggle an instant within himself, and accept.

From that day Ernest Maltravers loved, with an idolatrous worship, Ruth Reginald, and though he knew she was the promised wife of another, he still clung to his affection with ten-fold tenacity.

And Ruth?

Before she had met Ernest Maltravers, she had believed she had loved a young army officer, then stationed at Baton Rouge, for he was handsome, of fine form, fascinating manners, and a dashing cavalry captain, who turned the heads and won the hearts of nearly all the girls he met.

Besides, Captain Percy Le Roy was a man of wealth, and the descendant of one of the oldest families in America, a boon companion of Ralph Reginald, and a favorite with the judge, and his course of true love had glided smoothly along until Ernest Maltravers crossed the path of his betrothed, Ruth Reginald.

Two months more, and the beautiful maiden would have been bound for life in the matrimonial chains cast around her by Percy Le Roy; but then a change came over Ruth's dream of love, for the dark and fascinating face of Ernest Maltravers looked down upon her, and, coupled with the fact of having saved her from an awful doom, and the romance that surrounded his life, not to speak of his being an exile in his native place, all together caused the girl to turn most kindly toward him, and their every meeting but served to weld more firmly the chains that were encircling her.

Ere Ernest had visited the Riverdale plantation three times Ruth well knew that he loved her, and finding that her own heart was going forth to him and forgetting its loyalty to the man to whom she was engaged, she brought to mind all that had been said against Ernest, of his cruel affair with his cousin, of his wild life, and between her and her awakening love arose a strong barrier.

Whether Ruth, under ordinary circumstances, would not have conquered her growing attachment, cannot be said; but an unlooked-for meeting with Ernest brought to her mind only that which was good in his nature, and almost without an effort to do so, she felt she could not resist loving him.

Unmindful of the lesson taught her by her near escape from death, by remaining out late without an escort, Ruth was returning one pleasant evening from visiting a neighboring plantation, and her way led by the churchyard.

It was just after dark, and a full moon looming up above the eastern horizon cast a flood of silvery light around, and caused the monuments of the dead to look so weird-like in their solemn silence that Ruth urged her horse forward with the intention of dashing rapidly by the lonely spot for a feeling of superstitious fear crept over her.

Only a few bounds had her horse taken, when she beheld, patiently awaiting his master, the steed of Ernest Maltravers.

One glance across the glimmering tombs, and the tall form of the master was visible, standing beside the grave of his mother, over which his filial love had, a few days before, erected a marble shaft that glittered snow-white in the moonlight.

Acting upon the impulse of the moment, Ruth checked her horse suddenly, sprung to the ground, and hitching the animal, entered the churchyard with a firm step.

As she advanced, however, her courage somewhat failed her, and nervously she glanced around upon the earthly homes of those who slumbered in the city of the dead.

Timidly she advanced toward the tall form of Ernest Maltravers, who stood with folded arms and uncovered head, sadly and silently gazing downward.

A light touch upon his arm caused him to start suddenly, and his hand to seek his bosom as though for a weapon; but, turning quickly, he with surprise beheld the maiden beside him.

"Miss Reginald! you here?"

"Yes, Mr. Maltravers, I was passing, saw you standing here and sought you; have I done wrong to thus intrude upon your grief?"

"Miss Reginald, in thought you are ever present with me; but listen, now that you are here standing beside the grave of my mother, and facing the tomb of the man whom my hand placed beneath the sod, let me tell you the true story of the slander cast upon me by my enemies."

"Here in this sacred spot, I would not swear falsely, and here I would tell you that I am not as black as I am painted, though what others may think I care not. Will you listen, Miss Reginald?"

"I will hear all you have to say," quietly responded Ruth.

A silence of a moment followed, and then Ernest Maltravers said:

"You are aware, Miss Reginald, that years ago my mother adopted my cousin Howard, and brought him to Woodlawn to live; but you do not know it was at my wish, for I felt for the lonely orphan boy, and longed to have him for a brother."

"Through the years that followed I loved toward as though he were really my brother, and I believed that he loved me."

"Together we left for college, and then a pleasant rivalry sprung up in our games, studies, and the pastimes of youth, until between us passed the first shadow, when a young girl became the object of Howard's idolatry."

"Strange to say, she seemed to prefer me, and often I would tease Howard by devoting myself to her, although I cared little for her, and was surprised that my cousin did not see her selfish nature."

"Thus matters progressed until one day an anonymous letter came to me, giving me the startling news that a plot existed between Howard Maltravers and the woman in question, to get possession of my property."

"I laughed the idea to scorn, until, upon going to the city for a few days, I received a letter, addressed in Howard's well-known hand."

"Upon opening it, imagine my horror in discovering that he had made a mistake in inclosing the letters in the envelopes, sending me the one intended for his lady-love, and doubtless forwarding mine to her."

"Honour forbade my reading it; but, startled by the first line I continued on and discovered, alas, that a deep plot indeed was laid to entrap me, for the beautiful fiend who called herself a woman, was to entice me into a marriage with her, either by fair or foul means, and then, between the two guilty lovers, I was to be disposed of, and my sinful wife was to marry my cousin."

"This is terrible, Mr. Maltravers," said the surprised Ruth.

"Well may you say so, Miss Reginald, for it was a most diabolical plot entered into by two who certainly loved each other, but with a love that was guilt itself, and which was to be consummated by dishonor and deadly crime."

"Words can not portray to you, Miss Reginald, the agony I felt at this discovery; I was completely stunned for a while, but at length felt a longing for revenge; and I at once sought the home of the maiden, who resided in the city where I then was."

"She received me most kindly, but when I abruptly handed her the letter, her face turned deadly pale, and her guilt was assured in my mind."

"Without a word I left her, and, returning to college, sought an interview with my cousin, and together we walked into the forest, and I furled into his face his treachery."

"Surprised at my discovery, driven to desperation at his shameful position, and hating me in his heart, he drew his revolver; but I struck it from his hand and covered him with my own weapon, while I told him I would not take his life with-

out giving him a chance, but let him meet me upon even terms.

"He accepted; we chose our positions, and I turned to walk to my stand, when suddenly a deafening report rung in my ears, and I felt a stinging sensation in my arm.

"Quickly I turned, and again he fired upon me in a cowardly manner, when I raised my revolver and shot him through the heart.

"You know of my trial, Miss Reginald, and what followed, and my return home the very evening that my mother was buried. But you do not know that it was Howard Maltravers who poisoned my mother's heart against me, her son, and who wrote many slandering letters to the neighbors regarding my course at college. The letters written to my mother I found in her desk at home, and my servants and overseer have told me how the rumors of my fast life went around the neighborhood. That I was wild, nay, dissipated, I do not deny, Miss Reginald; but, that I have ever been dishonorable I aver is utterly false, as it is also, that in the sight of God I am the murderer of the man who lies buried there."

"Miss Reginald, my story is ended, and to you I have told it, that in your pure heart I might not be considered the guilty wretch that men call me."

Ernest Maltravers paused, and folded his arms across his broad breast, while he turned his dark, searching eyes upon the maiden, who stood with bowed head before him.

Presently the haughty head was raised, the wealth of golden curls shaken back, and the beautiful face turned upon the man before her, while teardrops glistened in her eyes like diamonds in the moonlight.

Laying her hand upon the arm of Ernest Maltravers, Ruth said in a voice tremulous with feeling:

"My poor, poor friend! how you have suffered. Would that I could take from you the fearful weight of sorrow you bear so heavily."

The eyes of the young man flashed fire, his form trembled, as he replied:

"Ruth, you are the promised wife of another; still I can but tell you that I love you with all the strength of my inmost soul, and were it possible for me to claim you as my own, every obstacle and sorrow then, with you by my side, would vanish forever."

"But no; you love another, and forever are you lost to me."

"No, no, no! do not say that, for I do not love other than you, Ernest Maltravers, and this night will I sever the bonds that bind me to Captain Le Roy," and the maiden spoke with earnest determination and feeling.

"Bless you, my darling; may God forever bless you; but do nothing rash. Wait yet awhile, and all may be well. Come, the night air is growing chill, and I must see you home."

A moment more and the two were mounted and slowly wending their way toward Riverdale, when the sound of hoof-strokes was heard behind them, and the next instant, with clashing sword and ringing spurs, an officer in full uniform rode up, and was passing, when he suddenly drew rein, saying:

"Ruth! why, this is an unexpected pleasure, for I was on my way to visit you, having obtained a few days' leave."

Ruth somewhat coldly received the outstretched hand, and replied quietly:

"Captain Le Roy, allow me to present my friend, Mr. Maltravers, the gentleman who saved my life some time since."

"Mr. Maltravers, I am glad to meet you, that I may thank you for saving the life of one whose death would take all the sunshine from my heart," and the handsome young soldier held forth his hand, which Ernest grasped with the courtesy of the well-bred gentleman.

"Captain Le Roy, I will now transfer my duty of escort to you. Miss Reginald, I bid you good-evening."

Raising his hat, Ernest Maltravers wheeled his horse and dashed away, to be soon lost from view to the eyes of the soldier and maiden, who slowly continued their way toward the Riverdale plantation, Ruth's thoughts of a most painful character, and Percy Le Roy happy at again being in the presence of the woman he so fondly loved.

CHAPTER IV.

THROUGH DEATH TO LOVE.

READER, have you not already wondered, as you have kindly perused the foregoing chapters, what connection there was in the scenes and incidents therein related, amid the land of refinement and civilization, and a story of wild,

western life, where the crack of the rifle, the war-whoop of the Indian, and the yelp of the coyote are the only sounds that break the silence of majestic nature?

But have patience, kind friend, who thus far hast followed me in my story of romantic realities of life on the frontier. In the succeeding chapter the scene will change from the land of cultivation, amid flowering orange groves, and ripening fields of the cotton and the cane, to the country toward the setting sun, where the prairies stretch forth in boundless magnificence, their downy verdure pressed only by the hoofs of the buffalo, the deer, the light paw of the wolf, the moccasined foot of the red-man or scout, or the iron-shod hoof of the trooper's steed, thrust between the border settlements and their savage foes.

Having given my explanation for thus long lingering afar from the scenes of stirring strife, where the characters of this story are destined to play a most active part, I will now once more beg the reader to accompany me to the home of Ernest Maltravers, at a time two weeks after his meeting with Ruth in the country churchyard.

In the spacious library of Woodlawn sat Ernest Maltravers, one pleasant evening just after twilight. The candles were lighted, and their presence discovered two other persons in the room, a stern-looking man of the law, and his clerk, a young man of twenty.

A few moments before the lawyer and his clerk had arrived at the mansion, and requested an interview with the young planter.

"Mr. Maltravers," began the man of law, abruptly, when Ernest entered the room, "I regret that my continued absence from the State has prevented me from making known to you the disposition your late honored mother made of her property in her will."

"There was no hurry, Mr. Weston, for I had ample means of my own to keep the place running on smoothly; but now that you have returned, it will give me pleasure to hear all you have to tell."

"Not so much pleasure as you may think, sir, for your share is a very small one."

"What mean you, Mr. Watson?"

"Simply that your mother disinherited you for your base ingratitude to her—"

"Hold, sir! dare to say that, in thought, word, or act, I was ever ungrateful to my mother, and I'll still your false tongue forever!" and Ernest Maltravers sprung to his feet, his face pale with anger.

"I will make no assertions of my own, Mr. Maltravers, for we all know you care little for human life; but I merely state the words of your much-revered mother, who, in her last will and testament, duly signed and witnessed, did devote her entire property to charity, excepting the slaves, who were all to be set free, and given a small allowance to start them in life."

"The plantation was to be sold, and the proceeds were to go toward building a new church in the neighborhood—"

"Are you aware, Mr. Weston, that this plantation and its slaves have been the property of several generations of Maltraverses, descending from father to son, according to English law, and that my mother was a poor girl when my father married her?" bitterly asked Ernest.

"I am aware, sir, as the lawyer of the estate, of the fact you mention; but, I am also aware that your mother was left full power by your father, who could not, of course, expect the career you would enter upon—"

"Spare your facetious remarks, Mr. Weston, but continue, sir, with your conversation regarding the will of my late mother."

The lawyer discovered in the face of Ernest no mood for trifling, and resumed:

"Over a certain property in New Orleans, left you by a distant relative, your mother had, of course, no control, together with a few thousand dollars cash she held of yours, as rents of the said property, and which amount of money I have here to turn over to you."

"Other than this, you have no claim upon Woodlawn, its slaves, and the remainder of your respected mother's property."

"Mr. Weston, allow me to state, did I see proper I would contest the will that disinherits me, and I believe I could regain my property; but the last will of my mother shall remain inviolate, and not one penny of the wealth she considered her own will I take."

"It is not the loss of wealth, sir, that I care for, but the sad thought that my poor, misjudging mother went to her grave at enmity with her only son. Yet I do not reproach her; I will not cast one unkind word or look upon her memory, but accept the situation as it is, and pray

God to forgive one whom I ever loved dearer than my own life.

"The sum due me, sir, I will trouble you to count out at once, for that is my own, and then I will forever leave this hated spot— Hold, sir! bandy no words with me, for I am in no mood to hear you."

"I was merely going to say that if you would intrust in my hands the management of your New Orleans property, I would render a strict account, and—"

"I will see you cursed first, sir! and, hark ye, both of you, until to-morrow morning I will be master of this house, where first I saw the light of day, and where the darkness of an eternal night seems now to be settling down upon my life; so I bid you leave me this instant!"

"Come to-morrow and pillage, sell, and do as you please; but, by Heaven! this night tarry not near me, or I'll not be responsible, bounds of the law that you are, for my conduct."

"Hence, I say! at once!"

A magnificent impersonation of anger looked Ernest Maltravers, as he stood proudly erect in the library, his brow dark, his lips stern, and his right arm pointing toward the door, while his withering gaze fell fiercely upon the lawyer and his clerk.

Both felt that their lives were in danger if they tarried longer, and quickly depositing the bags of gold upon the table, they beat a hasty and undignified retreat, and the rattle of their carriage-wheels was soon heard going down the avenue on its way back to town.

Through the long hours of that lonely night, Ernest Maltravers paced his weary beat to and fro, until the gay glimmer of dawn aroused him to exertion, and he set about his preparations for his departure.

Shortly after sunrise he bade farewell to his servants, and bidding Toby bring his baggage into the town and leave it at the hotel, he mounted his mare and rode away, taking the road leading to Riverdale.

Dismounting before the handsome residence of Judge Reginald, he threw his bridle-rein to a negro servant in waiting, and ascending the broad stairway, was met by Ruth, who started back on beholding his cold, stern face.

What passed between the two lovers none knew, but an hour after Ernest Maltravers rode away from Riverdale, his face no longer clouded.

Arriving at the hotel in the town, distant ten miles from Woodlawn, he met face to face with Captain Le Roy.

With a slight bow he would have avoided him, when the young officer advanced and said:

"Can I see you in private, Mr. Maltravers?"

"Certainly, sir; come with me to my room."

Leading the way, the two were soon alone; and in a voice trembling with emotion, Captain Le Roy said:

"Mr. Maltravers, I sought you to say that, in your conduct with Miss Reginald, you have fully sustained the character that all give you."

"I do not understand you, Captain Le Roy; be more explicit," quietly responded Ernest.

"I will, sir; you were so fortunate as to save the life of Miss Reginald, and knowing how kindly she felt toward you, although you knew she was my promised wife, you sought her affections, won them, and this day she has cast me off."

"From whom do you get this information, sir?"

"Mr. Maltravers, I beg you not to trifile with me, for I am a desperate man, rendered so by losing the idol of my life."

"An hour ago I saw Ralph Reginald, and in a conversation with him last night, Ruth told him that I was to be discarded, and that she loved you."

"In fury at having his old companion thus set adrift by his sister, and believing you had taken advantage of your service rendered her, to win her from me, and determined she should not marry a man whose name was Cain-accursed, and whose evil deeds were upon every tongue, Ralph Reginald left her to seek you at your home, after he had visited a friend who was lying ill at a plantation near by."

"Determined that Ralph Reginald should not fall a victim to your deadly aim, it was my intention to at once find you, and dare you to meet me in the duello, for without Ruth I have nothing to live for, and if I fall, it will but save the life of her brother."

At another time Ernest Maltravers might have acted differently; but, smarting under his misfortunes, and feeling that the whole world was against him, he merged into a dangerous mood, and replied, sneeringly:

"Captain Le Roy, I am at your service when-

ever you desire, and am willing to meet you late this afternoon at the point of land in front of the Woodlawn estate. As I have no seconds, sir, you had better come alone, and swords being inconvenient weapons to carry, perhaps our pistols will serve us as well."

"As you please, sir; I will be there," and Percy Le Roy turned and left the room.

Upon the same day, when the sun was low in the western horizon, Ernest Maltravers drew his horse up at the appointed rendezvous, and found Captain Le Roy already there awaiting him.

The two men saluted each other coldly, and having measured off thirty paces, took their positions back to back to walk, each one fifteen steps, and wheel and advance firing.

Both were nerved to the struggle for life or death, Ernest determined to live for his newfound love, and Percy Le Roy anxious, by taking the life of his enemy, to save Ralph Reginald, who he knew would challenge the young planter, and also there was a lingering hope that Ruth might then return to her first love.

At a given word the young men stepped away, counting aloud each step, until together they called out the number fifteen, and wheeling, Captain Le Roy fired once, twice, thrice, advancing with each shot.

But Ernest Maltravers stood still, cool, determined and unhurt, until his foe had discharged his fifth shot and advanced half the distance between them.

Then he quickly raised his weapon, a flash and report followed, and, with a stifled cry, Percy Le Roy fell forward upon his face, the blood spurting from a wound in his left side.

Ere Ernest Maltravers could reach the wounded man, the rapid clatter of hoofs resounded through the forest, and the next instant up dashed Ralph Reginald, his face flushed and manner excited.

At a glance he took in the situation—his friend lying bleeding upon the ground, and his destroyer standing near, his pistol still in hand.

With a cry of rage he spurred forward, at the same time drawing a revolver from his belt.

"Back, sir; back, I say! Would you ride to your death, Ralph Reginald?" cried Ernest Maltravers, in anger.

But, unheeding, Ralph spurred on, and then came a sharp crack, and the steed ridden by the young man fell dead in his tracks, hurling his rider to the ground.

Instantly springing to his feet, Ralph again rushed forward, firing as he came on, until again Ernest Maltravers's deep tones warned him off.

But, unheeding, Ralph still came on, and in an earnest voice came the words:

"Good God forgive me for this act!"

Instantly the sharp ring of a revolver was heard, and Ralph Reginald fell dead, a bullet through his brain.

"Accursed indeed is my life now; but I must not tarry here, and after going so far I will not give her up; yet she must never know; no, no, no, never!"

Springing into his saddle, Ernest Maltravers rode away from the fatal spot with the speed of the wind, and in half an hour dashed up to the door of the Riverdale mansion.

An hour passed, and in the stillly night two forms came forth from the house, and mounting the one horse, rode swiftly away toward the river-bank, where was a landing, toward which a steamer was then approaching.

A few moments more of anxious suspense, and Ernest Maltravers and Ruth Reginald had left behind them the quiet plantation homes upon the Mississippi, and were embarked, for good or evil, upon the broad face of the earth, never more together to wander again, amid the scenes where both had known so much of pleasure and of pain.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRAIRIE ROVER'S BRAVE DEED.

NIGHT upon the boundless prairie! its silence and solitude alone broken by a horse and rider, slowly wending their way over the unbroken plain.

Darkness upon all around, but a darkness slowly becoming of a grayish hue before the near approach of dawn, which already brightens up the eastern skies.

Alone in the vast solitude and silence, alone with nature and nature's God, the horseman, as impressed with the scene and its calm influence, slowly rides along, his gaze fixed upon the eastern skies, growing brighter and brighter as the moments pass on.

As the rosy tint of morn brightened up the

expansile plains, the face and form of horse and rider became visible; a large black mustang of great beauty, and with every indication of wonderful speed and endurance, while his rider stood fully six feet in height, was a yielding, graceful form, denoting strength and activity and a handsome, daring face that would win confidence, and was indicative of a determined will, a bold spirit and a generous heart.

Scarcely more than thirty years of age in appearance, there were yet lines about the firm mouth and around the corners of the eyes, with here and there silver threads in his dark hair which proved that he was either older than he appeared, or had seen much sorrow and trouble.

He was attired in a full suit of dressed buckskin, ornamented with bead and quill-work, and wore a belt containing three silver-mounted revolvers, and a long, keen knife, in a leather sheath.

At his back was slung a short seven-shooting rifle of late invention, and at his saddle-bow hung a keen little ax and a horse-hair lariat.

Upon his head he wore a broad sombrero, encircled by a cord of gold, and his feet were incased in cavalry boots, the heels being armed with massive gold spurs.

He was one of those wandering men of the Western plains, half hunter, half guide, a scomtrapper, or Indian-fighter, according to circumstances; but one whose early life had been passed amid far different scenes, for his face was refined and bore the stamp of intellect, though somewhat marred by the stern look resting upon the mouth, and which his brown mustache failed to hide, while his hair, worn long and flowing, gave him, at first glance, an effeminate look.

As the daylight grew stronger, the horseman suddenly sprang to the ground, and a word to his faithful steed caused him to sink quickly and quietly down in the tall prairie grass.

A glance across the prairie had occasioned this sudden move on the part of the horseman, and a closer glance discerned, some four miles distant, a small cavalcade of half a dozen horsemen, approaching at a sweeping gallop.

Constant solitude causes the Western hunter soon to learn to speak aloud when alone, as in addressing his thoughts to himself, or his steed, and thus it was with the horseman, who, after a closer inspection of the approaching cavalcade, said aloud:

"It is most too far to tell their color, but I do not think they are Indians."

Then as the eastern skies grew more rosy before the upward march of the sun, he cried:

"By Heavens! they are Indians, and in full pursuit of a fugitive—and the pursued is woman!"

"Be on the alert, old Comrade, for the enemy is at hand," and the scout affectionately patted the neck of his faithful steed, who, in turn, rubbed his nose against his master's shoulder.

Rapidly on came the pursued and pursuing, hardly a hundred yards dividing them, and the Indians riding close together, as though their horses were of average speed.

Glancing attentively at the horse in flight, the scout observed that it was a light-limbed gray, evidently unused to prairie life, for steadily the mustangs of the Indians were gaining upon him.

The rider of the gray was indeed a woman, otherwise a young girl, scarcely more than seventeen, and even at that distance the scout beheld that she had a yielding, graceful form, and a mass of golden hair flying in the wind.

"She has been taken from the settlements by those red devils, and in some way has managed to elude their watchfulness and to escape. Now, Comrade, it is time for us to act, for in a few moments more they will be upon us. Up, old fellow!"

With a bound Comrade was upon his feet, and nimbly springing into his saddle, the scout gave a wild and prolonged whoop, and dashed forth to meet the flying girl.

The effect of his sudden appearance was magical upon both the maiden and the Indians, for the former, at once recognizing him as a pale-face, urged her horse forward with redoubled earnestness, while consternation seemed to seize upon the red-skins, who immediately drew rein, as if to hold a council of war.

The next instant the maiden dashed up to the side of the scout, her face flushed, hair disheveled and tears glittering in her beautiful eyes—tears of joy at her escape, for, after one glance into the daring, handsome face of the man before her, she felt no fear.

"Do not hesitate here, miss, but ride out of range, while I have a little skirmish with those

fellows," quietly said the scout, gazing with admiration upon the young girl.

"But you will be in danger, sir," she softly returned.

"My life is always in danger, miss; but ride on, please, for here come the devils."

Quickly obeying, the maiden once more urged her horse forward, and halting at the distance of a few hundred yards, beheld the scout dashing swiftly on to meet the Indian warriors, who, five in number, seemed surprised at the daring of the single horseman.

But he gave them no time for surprise, for, unslinging his rifle, he suddenly drew Comrade back upon his haunches, and once, twice, thrice, rung forth the shots, and two red-skins and one mustang were the victims.

In dismay, the three remaining warriors turned to fly, the dismounted one endeavoring to catch one of the ponies of his dead companions; but like the wind the scout bore down upon him, and he was compelled to come to bay, at the same time uttering a cry for aid to the two flying braves, and venting his war-whoop of defiance against his pale-face foe.

Quickly the rifle of the warrior went to his shoulder, a report followed, and throwing up his arms, the scout reeled in his saddle, swayed violently from side to side, and then fell to the ground, while the trusty Comrade circled around him in a gallop, neighing loudly as if in distress.

Instantly, yell after yell of triumph broke from the Indian warrior, as he dashed forward to scalp his foe, while his yells were echoed from his two companions, who wheeled to the right-about as soon as they saw their enemy fall, and came back with their ponies at their speed. With a groan of despair the maiden wheeled her tired gray, and once more sped away in wild flight, almost every hope of escape having left her.

But, suddenly, she heard a shot behind her, followed by another and another in quick succession, and wondering, she looked back to find the scout upon his feet, and only one Indian warrior visible, and he clinging closely to his swiftly-flying pony.

Then she saw the scout bound upon the back of Comrade, and away darted the black mustang in pursuit, his mighty bounds quickly overhauling his smaller rival.

A few moments more and there was a circle around the scout's head, a dark mass was launched quickly forward, and the steed of the Indian tumbled violently to the ground, crushing his rider beneath him, while over the still prairie went forth the triumphant war-cry of the pale-face.

"Noble old Comrade! We got away with the whole of them, did we not?"

"Five scalps in half an hour!" and so saying, the scout dismounted, bent over, and the bleeding scalp-lock was soon in his belt.

From one to the other of the fallen braves he went, and just as he attached his last war-trophy to his string, where already hung two score and more mementoes of desperate encounters, the maiden dashed up, her face radiant with joy at her escape.

"You thought I had gone under, miss, and so decamped," said the scout, politely raising his broad sombrero.

"Yes, sir; but are you not hurt?"

"Not in the least; it was an old trick of mine to catch that fellow's companions, who were flying like mad across the prairie."

"Now I am at your service to escort you back to the settlements, for doubtless you live there."

"Yes, sir; I am Nina Vernon, the daughter of the commandant of the fort."

"Indeed! It gives me pleasure to have served Colonel Vernon, through his most beautiful daughter," and the scout again bent an admiring look upon the lovely young face, until the eyes of Nina Vernon lowered before his own, for she read there, girl though she was, the power her beauty had over the dashing, handsome man.

After a short rest and an humble meal, from the scout's haversack, the two set forth for the fort, distant some forty miles, and the maiden told her brave preserver that she lived in the settlement with her aunt, a sister of her father, and that it was while on her way to the fort to visit her parent, that she had suddenly been met by the Sioux warriors, who had made her a prisoner and hurried her away.

At night they had camped, and the next morning, just before day, when they were preparing to start, she had suddenly bounded away from them, with the determination to escape, believing her gray horse could easily distance their Indian ponies.

For a while the gray had kept well ahead of their ponies, but unaccustomed to a long run, they soon began to overhaul him, and her recapture would have been certain, had she not unexpectedly met the scout.

"It was bold of the red-skins to venture thus near the fort; but I think I understand their motive."

"And can I ask what it was?"

"Certainly; they knew you to be the daughter of the chief military commander on the border, and imagined they could bring your father to agree to their terms, ere they surrendered you."

"They would not have harmed me, then?"

"They would have slain you without mercy, had Colonel Vernon refused their request."

"Then to you I owe my life, for I know my father too well to feel that he would allow even his love for me to interfere with his duty; but I am a soldier's daughter, and would have died without fear; though it is a horrible thought to have to die so young, is it not, sir?"

"For years, Miss Vernon, I have been, I may say, hand in hand with death, so I have not the dread of it most persons feel. But what a joy it will be to your father and aunt to meet you once more."

"Indeed it will, for they love me dearly."

"I do not wonder at it, for I—but, yonder come a party of horsemen, and until we know whether they are friends or foes, it behooves us to be cautious," and drawing rein, the scout narrowly scanned a small cavalcade visible across the prairie, some six miles distant.

After a close inspection, the scout continued slowly:

"They are some forty in number, and—ha! they are soldiers for the sun glitters upon their arms."

"Yes, I see them now myself, and—"

"And what, Miss Vernon?" quietly asked the scout.

"And I will undoubtedly have to trouble you no longer, for they are doubtless my father's troopers."

"Would that I had never other trouble than you can give," said the scout, somewhat sadly; and then he continued: "Yes, they are a cavalry squadron, and they are following on the Indian trail; now they see us; and, listen, you can hear the troopers cheer, even at this distance."

Rapidly riding forward, the scout and Nina Vernon soon drew near to the soldiers, who cheered lustily as they beheld the maiden no longer in the power of the red-men.

At the head of the squadron rode a man of about fifty years of age but most youthful in movement and appearance.

With a glad smile upon his soldierly face, Colonel Vernon pressed forward, and the next moment affectionately saluted his daughter, who, after bowing kindly to two young officers at the head of the troop, and waving her hand to the soldiers, said quickly:

"Father, this is the gentleman who has saved my life; but I do not know his name."

The colonel turned toward the scout, who quietly sat on his horse, and said:

"My friend, I owe you a debt I can never repay, except by a lasting friendship; but you are a stranger to me, for I cannot recall your face."

"Yet we have met before, Colonel Vernon, but it matters not where or when; now our paths lie in different directions, for I was on my way further into the Indian country, when I met Miss Vernon."

The colonel gazed at the man before him with surprise, for he saw in his face, bearing and conversation that he was no ordinary person, and his reply that he was going still further into a hostile country, and alone, caused him to feel some suspicion regarding him; so he replied:

"You certainly cannot intend pressing further into the savage country, for it is even unsafe for a small body of troops as I have to penetrate this far from the fort, with the hostile tribes now going upon the war-path all around us."

The scout smiled slightly, and answered:

"Those enemies which I cannot defeat, Colonel Vernon, Comrade can show a clean pair of heels to. I know this border, sir, from the Black Hills down to the Rio Grande, and it is to discover the intention of the red-skins that I now enter their country."

"Are you a settler on the frontier, can I ask?"

"No, sir; I am a free rover of the prairies, with no country, no people, no home other than the forest and the plains."

"Pardon me; are you not he that is called the Prairie Rover?" and one of the two young officers rode forward, a handsome, dashing young captain, who had turned the heads of half the border belles, and was in turn desperately in love with Nina Vernon.

"I am he that is called the Prairie Rover, Captain Raymond," quietly returned the scout, and every eye was upon him, for, from the Missouri river to the Rocky Mountains the name had become known, though who the scout in reality was, whence he came, or his name, none could tell.

But certain it was, far and wide he was known as a deadly foe to the Indians, and strange stories were told of how he lived alone in a distant glen, and that his wigwam was fringed with the scalps of his red enemies, who dreaded the very mention of his name.

"You are then the Prairie Rover?" absently said Colonel Vernon, looking fixedly into the splendid face before him, while Nina, with renewed interest, gazed upon him.

Without replying directly to the question, the scout returned:

"The Indians who stole your daughter, Colonel Vernon, were picked warriors, under the renowned chief, Big Wolf—"

"Say you so? I would give much to take that red devil, for he has caused the whole frontier a world of trouble."

"Here hangs his scalp, colonel, with those of the four other braves who kidnapped Miss Vernon," modestly said the scout.

"What! single-handed you attacked five warriors, one of whom was Big Wolf, and defeated them? You are a marvelous man, scout!"

"Thank you, sir. Now let me urge that you return to the fort, for hostile bands of red-skins are about, and you do not wish an engagement in your present company," and the scout glanced in the direction of Nina, and catching his meaning, the colonel replied:

"I will follow your advice. Again let me thank you for the service rendered me, and believe me the fort shall ever be a home to you. Good-by."

Holding out his hand as he spoke, the scout grasped it warmly, and said:

"The result of my discoveries you shall know, colonel; but my word for it, the settlers should be thoroughly on their guard, for a storm-cloud of war is soon to break along the border, the more terrible in its ferocity because renegades will be the leaders of the red-skins."

"Ha! say you so? I had heard this hinted before."

"It is true, colonel; but between the frontier and danger there will be one protecting arm you little dream of. Gentlemen, good-morning. Miss Vernon, when next we meet, I trust you will have recovered from the fatigues of your rough ride."

Without another word the scout raised his sombrero, bent low in his saddle, and with a word to Comrade, sped like a bird over the prairie, his course watched with interest by those whom he had left behind.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WAR-CLOUD.

THE fort, under the command of Colonel Vernon, was one of the most important outposts on the border, situated upon the northern bank of the upper waters of the Arkansas.

The country around was most fertile, and adapted to cultivation and stock-raising. For miles around the military post were scattered the humble homes of the bold pioneer settlers, many of whom were from the higher walks of life, and whom loss of fortune had driven to seek the Far West.

As Colonel Vernon had been for long years the commander of an outpost, he had established for himself a cabin home, and surrounded it with many comforts, if not luxuries, and here was wont to pass his leisure hours, when military duty did not keep him at the fort, or fighting Indians.

His sister, a maiden lady of about thirty-five, was his housekeeper, and acted as a mother to his Nina, for the colonel had lost his wife years before; and it was a comfortable, cheerful Western home, and both the aunt and niece seemed perfectly happy, especially the latter, for she was a reigning belle upon the plains, and every young officer at the fort, and handsome scout and hunter that trod the prairies, loved her dearly, as young as she was, and longed to have her cheer their homes with her bright presence.

But Nina was considerable of a coquette, and even the handsome and dashing Captain Raymond could not settle in his own mind

whether the little beauty really cared for him, or was playing with his affection.

Returning in safety to her home after her capture by the red-skins, Nina was welcomed with shouts of joy by all, and it was gratifying for her to see that all the young settlers and hunters were forming a band to start to her rescue, and the look of disappointment when they saw her return in safety without their aid, Nina plainly detected.

Determined to be more guarded in the future, and alarmed by the words of the Prairie Rover, Colonel Vernon at once called a council of the settlers, and all arrangements were entered upon for strongly guarding the settlement from a surprise and an attack, and scouts were sent out on duty for miles around.

Slowly passed the days away until they numbered ten, since Nina's rescue, and yet no sign of hostile Indians was visible, and the settlers began to hope that the war-cloud had blown over, when, suddenly through the settlement dashed a horseman, his steed fairly flying over the ground as he sped toward the fort.

Silently and erect he sat in his saddle, uttering no word of warning, but pressing on; and from lip to lip went the words:

"That man is the Prairie Rover."

Skimming along swiftly, the black mustang soon drew rein at the portal of the fort, and dashed within, when he was brought to a halt, and his master said:

"I would see Colonel Vernon."

"Enter the cabin to the right, sir," politely said the guard. And the knock upon the door was answered by a stern :

"Come in."

"Ha! my worthy friend, it is you? Welcome back," and the colonel warmly welcomed the scout, whose eyes sought another portion of the room, where sat Nina, arranging some wild flowers in a vase.

"Thank you, sir; I have come as a bearer of important tidings—Miss Vernon, good-evening," and he grasped the hand which Nina extended toward him, while a sweet smile of welcome was upon her face.

"Say you so, scout? Is it a move of the tribes against us?"

Prairie Rover glanced toward Nina, and reading his look, Colonel Vernon said:

"Never mind Nina; she is a soldier's daughter, and must listen unmoved to tales of war."

"Well, sir, I will make my report at once, for it is necessary to be on the alert. I penetrated, after parting with you, as far as the hills without particular advantage, and meeting with a friendly Indian, he led me, in disguise, into the village of the Sioux, where a council of chiefs belonging to the hostile tribes was being held.

"Believing me to be a renegade white, a sub-chief of one of the lower southern tribes, I was invited to the council lodge, and hence had every opportunity to discover the plans of the Indians."

"It was a daring undertaking, scout, and one I am rejoiced to see you well out of; but, go on; you interest me greatly, and I declare, Nina is really pale at the thought of the danger you ran."

The scout's dark face flushed slightly, and he continued:

"In that council lodge were the most famous warriors of the hostile tribes, and one man, a pale-face, who is the instigator and leader of the whole move."

"Indeed! and he is—"

"The man who has won the title of the Prairie Robin Hood."

"Hai! I half suspected your answer. Scout, I would give my commission to take that man alive," cried Colonel Vernon, earnestly.

"And I would give my life if I could take his," sternly replied the scout, and in a tone so bitter and deep that both Nina and her father started, for they felt that it was no ordinary hatred that caused Prairie Rover to speak thus.

After an instant's hesitation the scout resumed:

"It was not the first time that the Prairie Robin Hood and myself had met, and it will not be the last!"

"With my hands tied, as it were, I was compelled to sit and listen to that man's diabolical harangues to the Indians, and hear him plot and plan to lay the settlement in ashes, for he seemed to be a perfect fiend in his hatred of his own race."

"Narrowly he watched and questioned me regarding the lower tribes, and though I could see his suspicions were aroused, he had to be satisfied, as the Indian chief who had presented

me at the council was high in authority, and would not have his friend insulted."

"Strange that an Indian, knowing your true character, should have betrayed his countrymen."

"Not so, sir, when I tell you that my friend is a Comanche brave, one whose life I saved, and who followed me from the burning prairies of the far South-west, and treated with kindness by the Sioux, he warned them of the coming attack of a hostile tribe, and for it was made a chief. He is friendly to me, and hence to the pale-faces, against whom he will raise no hand in anger.

"But, to continue: the chiefs, headed by Robin Hood, the renegade, agreed to raise the tomahawk along the whole border, pressing forward in large force toward the upper settlements, and coming southward, continue their work of ruin and bloodshed. This was the plan of the white chief, who is to assemble his renegade band at the head of the Indians, and thus encourage them in their work of deviltry."

"The white hound! Oh! if I can ever get him in my power! But when is this move to be made, scout?"

"Within the week, Colonel Vernon, and I would advise that you at once throw your heaviest force toward the upper settlements, warn the whole line, draw in all your detached posts, and then, if you will trust me with a command, I will make a move toward the Indian villages in the hills that will soon bring the red devils back to protect their homes."

"You plan like a soldier, scout, and as numerous as are our enemies, thus warned as we will be along the whole line, they will find us more than a match, even headed as they will be by that desperado, Robin Hood, and his band of renegades; but how many men will you require?"

"I should like at least fifty troopers, and as many more of hunters, trappers, scouts and friendly Indians, whom I can collect in the settlement in half a day."

"This will give you a hundred men—a small force to penetrate thus far into the Indian country."

"We will make them think we are a thousand before we are done with them," said the scout, in a voice that caused both Nina and her father to laugh.

"You shall have the men, and pick them yourself."

"Thanks, colonel; then I will select first, Captain Ramsey Raymond," and the scout gazed furtively toward Nina to watch the effect of his words; but that coy maiden did not even show signs of having heard the name of the dashing young officer.

"You could not have a better man; hey, Nina?"

"Captain Raymond is a gallant officer, I think I have heard it said," demurely replied Nina.

"And an ardent lover, too, is he not?" slyly asked the colonel, with a wink at the scout.

"You should ask him, father, for I am no judge. Shall I call the orderly?"

"Yes—oh! here is Raymond now," and at that instant the young captain entered, his face beaming with pleasure when he beheld Nina.

In a few moments Colonel Vernon had made known to him all that the scout had said, and with delight the young officer learned that he was selected for the daring, nay, desperate duty of penetrating the Indian country to draw off the attacking forces from the settlements by a war in their own camps.

"It is a mission I accept with thanks for the honor bestowed in selecting me, Sir Scout."

"I felt that you would be most willing. Now, captain, I leave to you the selection of your men and horses, for the former must be the bravest of the brave, and the latter swift and with powers of great endurance, and as to my portion of the command, I will select only those men whom I know have been tried and are willing to die, if need be."

"Remember, the undertaking is one of terrible danger and hardship, for we will have to penetrate the Indian country, many long miles from any support, and our attacks will be made against Indian villages not wholly unprotected, and when we have succeeded in drawing the red-skins back to defend their homes, we will have to cut our way back through ten times our number."

"I understand the risks, and accept them with pleasure. When shall we start?" quietly replied Ramsey Raymond.

"To-night I will start, and the fourth night from this I will meet you and the command at the old ruined outpost just at the edge of the hill country. You remember it, as it was there you

fought Big Wolf and his warriors some two years ago."

"I remember it well, and will meet you there the fourth night from this. Shall I follow the southern trail to get there, as the Indians will doubtless be scouting on the northern one?"

"Yes, and travel only by night—from dark to daybreak, making your trips so as to get a motte to conceal you by day. If you see an Indian, let not one escape you to give warning, and in an important mission of this kind let me urge that the red-skins are treacherous, slippery scamps, and you had better take no prisoners, as dead men tell no tales."

The scout spoke sternly, and his three hearers felt that he was in deadly earnest.

"I understand; but can I ask why you go on ahead?"

"I desire to see this Robin Hood and his men start on their hellish expedition, count their numbers, and dispatch at once word to Colonel Vernon, the number of the enemy and the direction they take."

"Whom will you send, scout?" asked Colonel Vernon, with surprise.

"One who has never deceived me, one who has been my best friend and almost constant companion for years."

"When this ring is handed to you, you will know my messenger," and the scout held up to view a gold ring, fashioned after a snake, with ruby eyes.

Within the ring was engraved a French motto, which, translated, read:

"The day will come."

"Now I must go through the settlement, and hunt up my men; and, Colonel Vernon, as my horse needs rest, can I claim an animal from you for my ride?"

"My stables are at your service, scout," replied Colonel Vernon, and a short while after Prairie Rover departed in search of his band for the dangerous expedition he had so daringly determined upon.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CABIN HOME IN THE HILLS.

NIGHT had settled rudely down upon the earth, for the heavens were black with stormy clouds and the winds howled mournfully through the forests, driving great drops of rain into the face of a horseman, as his noble steed struggled bravely forward, ascending slowly but surely a steep hill, heavily timbered by giant trees.

"On, on, my good fellow," said the rider, and his voice was that of the Prairie Rover, while Comrade, cheered by the voice of his master, pressed on with renewed vigor.

"A short mile further, old comrade, and we will be safe from the storm, and a dry shelter and good feed await you," and still further encouraged, the good steed struggled against the storm.

A few moments more, and beneath an overhanging cliff the scout suddenly turned into a narrow canyon, or gorge, down which a torrent of water rushed nearly knee-deep.

Though the night was fearfully dark, Comrade seemed to fully understand his course, and after a tramp of a quarter of a mile, entered the yawning mouth of a large cavern, in the face of the cliff on the right.

Here the scout dismounted, and leading Comrade with one hand, while with the other he felt the side of the cavern wall, he walked slowly forward until he came out into an open space surrounded upon all sides by steep tree-clad hills, impossible of ascent.

A shrill whistle, and a light suddenly glimmered before him, at the distance of fifty yards, and the form of a man was visible in the open doorway of a small but strongly-built cabin.

"Come, Wild Wolf, down with the bridge," cried the scout, in a loud voice, and in a short while the person addressed advanced toward Prairie Rover, bearing upon his shoulders a heavy log, which he soon stood on one end and let fall across a deep chasm, some fifteen feet wide, that yawned between the cabin and the cave through the hill.

Two other similar pieces were then brought and placed in position, and a flooring of rough-hewn boards laid across, so that a frail bridge was manufactured across the chasm, and upon which both the scout and Comrade crossed to the other side without a tremor of fear, although a misstep, or the breaking of the frail support, would have hurled them hundreds of feet below.

Leading his horse into one end of the cabin, the scout soon rubbed him dry, and gave him

a good feed of dried grass, after which he entered the other apartment of the cabin, where his companion was busily engaged in preparing a substantial and tempting repast of buffalo-meat, jerked, corn-cakes and strong coffee.

"Well, Wild Wolf, what news have you?" said the scout, taking his wet blanket from around him, and seating himself near the blazing fire, while he addressed the Indian in the Comanche tongue.

The Indian was a tall, splendidly formed warrior, with a wild and daring look upon his strangely-marked face, while reaching to his waist hung masses of raven-black hair, giving him an untamed and ferocious appearance.

He was dressed in buck-skin, the leggings, hunting-shirt, and bead-wrought band around his head being heavily fringed with scalp-locks, while he wore in his belt a brace of revolvers, long knife and tomahawk.

Around his neck hung a chain of human bones, bear and wolf claws, and as a charm, or pendant, was the white, grinning skull of an infant scarcely more than a few weeks old.

Such was Wild Wolf, once a Comanche chief, who, for saving from torture the Prairie Rover, who had once protected him, had been sentenced to the stake by his own tribe.

But the scout whom he had rescued, would not see him die, and together the two had fled from the Indian village, and wandering together northward the two had ever remained firm friends.

Though Wild Wolf had been made a chief among the Sioux, for warning them of an approaching attack of their enemies, he contented himself only with the honor of the name, and passed his days in the secret retreat in the hills where Prairie Rover had established his home, in the very heart of a hostile country; and strange to say, the connection of the Comanche warrior and the renowned Prairie Rover was never suspected, the Indians believing Wild Wolf always on the hunt.

Yet, though Wild Wolf had served the Sioux, it was for no love for them, but at the request of his white brother, the scout, who thought that the act would turn out to their future advantage, and many were the scalps that might be seen at his belt that had once adorned the head of a Sioux warrior.

The cabin in the hills, so well concealed from discovery, and with its position naturally defended, was where the two comrades had lived for several years prior to the presentation of the scout to the reader; and in their secluded retreat they felt perfectly secure, while around them they had gathered as many comforts as could be expected in their isolated frontier home.

The walls of the cabin were adorned with the dressed skins of bears, buffaloes, deer, wolves and birds, while several rifles and pistols, with fishing-tackle and equestrian accoutrements, adorned the space over the fireplace.

Next to the room occupied by the scout and Wild Wolf, was a second apartment, wherein Comrade, and Flying Horse, the steed of the Indian, found shelter, and the back of the hut was against the cliff, wherein yawned the mouth of a large cave, which led entirely through the hills to the lowlands beyond, and which afforded a means of escape should an enemy advance in their front.

"Did the Wild Wolf do as his white brother requested?" said the scout, seating himself before the fire and vigorously attacking the savory supper.

"The Wild Wolf never forgets; he saw the Sioux warriors depart for the settlements, and at their head was a pale-face chief and his braves," quietly responded the Indian.

"When did they depart?"

"When the sun went to sleep."

"That was five hours ago; well, the storm will delay them to-night, and it will be day after to-morrow before they strike the settlement."

"Now, Wild Wolf, tell me how many there were."

"There were a thousand braves."

"Then they have left a stronger force behind than I expected they would; but this shall not deter me," said the scout, speaking more to himself than to his companion.

"Now, Wild Wolf, we must seek a few hours' rest and then be off, for I wish you to put Flying Horse to his speed, and seek the home of the white warriors."

"Give the white chief this ring, and tell him all that he would know regarding the movement of the renegades and their Sioux allies, and then hasten toward the northern settlements, and find the Indian band and tell them that hundreds of the pale-face braves are laying

waste their villages and slaying their squaws and pappooses."

"Where are the white braves?"

"They are not far from here and I will lead them; when you have told the Indians that their homes are attacked, return here and await me."

"Wild Wolf do all; go at once."

"No, let us take up our bridge first, then seek a few hours' rest, and then we will depart together through the cave leading to the lowlands."

"Wild Wolf understand," quietly responded the chief; and shortly after the two friends were calmly sleeping away the midnight hours.

But long ere daybreak they awoke, and when the sun arose it fell upon them many miles from the hills; the Indian mounted upon a brown mustang, pressing on in a long swinging gallop toward the fort, and Prairie Rover directing his course toward the ruined outpost, the appointed rendezvous with Captain Ramsay Raymond and his daring band.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS HORSEMAN.

The sun was yet some distance from the western horizon, when the scout arrived at the motte, situated upon the banks of a small stream, and where years before a small outpost had been established, but which, alas! had met with a sad fate, as its occupants had all fallen beneath the tomahawk and scalping-knife of the red-men.

Cautiously advancing into the timber, with his eyes searchingly invading every covert, and his nerves strung for action, should there be an enemy ambushed within, he soon felt assured that Captain Raymond and his band had not yet arrived.

He was preparing to stake Comrade out to feed upon the luxuriant grass, and had removed his saddle to better rest him, when there was a sound of something coming slowly through the underwood, but whether a buffalo, deer, or an enemy, he knew not.

Turning rapidly, he was about to replace his saddle, when a horse and rider dashed suddenly upon the scene, and at the same moment the eyes of the scout and the stranger met, the former with a gaze of wondering surprise, the latter with a look of fear.

The scout had seized his rifle and stood ready for action, but quickly the weapon was lowered, for before him, mounted upon a clean-limbed and thoroughbred-looking bay mare, was a young girl, scarcely eighteen years of age.

Her hair was black as the raven's plume, long, silken, and hung in massive braids down her back and rested upon her horse.

Her eyes were exceedingly large, lustrous, and with long, drooping lashes, while every feature was perfect, and the ruby lips, slightly parted, showed the teeth as white as pearls.

The complexion was that of a brilliant brnette, browned still deeper by the sun and wind, and in her cheeks glowed the hue of perfect health.

She was attired in a closely-fitting riding-habit of fashionable manufacture, of navy-blue, trimmed with silver buttons, wore on her hands gauntlet-gloves, and a light slouch hat, encircled by a silver cord, and shaded by a rich, black ostrich feather, was upon her head, while her steed was equipped with a horse-hair bridle, immense silver bit, and side-saddle covered with buck-skin, ornamented with beads and quill work.

Instinctively the scout raised his sombrero, and at this movement the lips of the beautiful maiden parted in a low order, her hand drew a silver-mounted pistol from a saddle-pocket, and away dashed the handsome mare, almost riding the scout down as she swept by.

"In Heaven's name, who is that girl, and where have I seen that face before?"

"What can she be doing here, alone on the prairie, and in an Indian country?"

"Doubtless she belongs to some wagon-train, and is lost; but I remember of no emigrant-train being expected here now."

"Who can she be? that's the question."

"At any rate, I'll never discover by remaining here, and yonder she goes like mad across the prairie, doubtless believing me an enemy."

"Come, Comrade, we must give chase."

Bounding into his saddle, the next moment the scout was flying in full pursuit across the prairie, about three hundred yards behind the swiftly-running steed ridden by the maiden.

"Come, Comrade, yonder light-heeled nag shows you the road, a thing no other animal on the frontier can do; by Heaven, she is leaving us, old fellow! Come!" and the scout urged on

his mustang, as glancing behind her, the maiden was seen to suddenly cause her mare to quicken her speed.

"Well, well, well! Comrade, you are doing your best, and the bay still creeps away from you," and with a look of disappointment at the sinking sun, and remembering his appointment, Prairie Rover applied the spurs to his horse, who, smarting with pain and rage at the unexpected treatment, bounded madly forward in pursuit.

But useless his mighty efforts; the bay slowly drew further and further ahead, until, after an hour's race, the scout reluctantly relinquished the attempt, and wheeling Comrade to the right-about, once more headed for the motte, ever and anon glancing behind him, and observing that the maiden still continued her rapid flight, until ere long the horse and rider appeared a mere speck upon the prairie.

Surprised at meeting such a strange creature in the motte, and wondering at her remarkable appearance and conduct, Prairie Rover searched every portion of the timber on foot for some clew to guide him in clearing up the mystery; but he at length gave up his task as fruitless, and after looking to the comfort of Comrade, threw himself down to rest, ere the coming of the band of troopers.

When he awoke, darkness was upon the prairie, and a long line of horsemen were visible, coming toward the timber, whom the scout recognized as the military squadron.

Ten minutes more he had warmly greeted Captain Raymond and his men, and retiring into the deeper recesses of the timber, the whole party sought shelter within the ruined walls of the stockade, which concealed the light of their camp-fires.

With but little adventure, Ramsey Raymond and his men had reached the motte, capturing and killing several Indians who had crossed their path, and the young officer congratulated the scout upon the success of the expedition thus far.

Prairie Rover then made known his having sent Wild Wolf to the fort, with news of the departure of the prairie Robin Hood and his red allies, and then he told him of his mysterious adventure with the lovely horsewoman in the motte; but Ramsey could give him no information regarding her, and they appealed to the men for information.

All seemed in the dark on the subject, except one old trapper, who declared to having himself seen the maiden, a year before, and his description of her proved to the scout that he was telling the truth.

"I've hear tell on the gal more than once, Prairie Rover, kase the Injuns has told me that they'd seen her, and they call her the Spirit of the Hills, 'cause you must know it's off yonder to the westward some forty miles or more, was where I see'd her, and they say she lives in the hill country; but you kin jist bet your bottom dollar she's no human gal, she nor the horse nuther."

"Not as bad as that, Dave, I think; but I would like to know more of her, and I'll solve the mystery yet," replied the scout, with determination.

It was then decided between Prairie Rover and Captain Raymond that they would encamp in the timber until dark the following night, and that this would give the men and horses a chance for perfect rest for the arduous and dangerous duties before them, and accordingly sentinels were soon set, and the camp was soon lost in deep repose.

The following day was spent by the men in clearing up their fire-arms, looking to their horses, mending their equipments, and cooking rations for a week, after which duties they ate a substantial dinner, and betook themselves to sleep away the remaining hours until the morning for starting.

With the disappearance of the sun behind the western hills, the clear notes of the bugle echoed through the motte, blowing "boots and saddles," and as twilight crept over the prairie, the daring band filed slowly forth from their retreat, and with Prairie Rover and Captain Ramsey at their head, took up the trail for the Indian villages.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RAID OF DEATH.

OVER the dark prairie, at an easy canter, the daring band pressed on, until at midnight they reached the rising land, and under the guidance of the scout they penetrated into the forest, and after three hours' longer ride drew rein at the head of a small valley.

"Now we are within two miles of the large

Sioux village of Chota, and we will rest and refresh ourselves and horses until daybreak," said the scout, dismounting and setting the example.

"Captain Raymond, the village below us numbers some two thousand souls, of whom doubtless two hundred are men, able to fight us."

"Thus my plan is for me to lead the advance with about thirty men right into the village, while you follow after the lapse of ten minutes with thirty of your troopers."

"The remainder of the force can be divided into two parties, one under the trapper Dave to strike at once for the cattle corral to stampede all the ponies, and the other under Lieutenant Hardcastle, to act as a reserve."

"When Dave has stampeded the cattle, he can then come up to our aid; and the lieutenant following him will cause a panic among the Indian camp, and cause them to believe our force much larger than it is."

"Also, let it be understood that we war only upon able-bodied men, and not upon women, children or cripples."

"I agree with you, scout; I detest this wholesale slaughter urged against red-skins, even though they are cruel savages."

"How long will you remain in the village, scout?"

"Not more than long enough to burn their wigwams, and spread complete consternation, and then we will dash on to Cheo, seven miles further up the valley, situated near a fall of the river, which will drown the noise of our attack here, and enable us to surprise them also."

"From Cheo we will take up position on the hills, and after a rest will ride through the lower valley where there is an encampment of Dog Soldier Sioux, and some Cheyennes, who have joined the expedition against the settlers."

"During the night we will encamp in the hills, and the following day sweep around upon the tribes who are encamped upon the border of the prairie and hill-land, after which, under cover of the following night, we must beat a hasty retreat."

"A well-organized plan, and one which our daring and energy must carry out."

"Now we will acquaint Hardcastle, Dave and the men with the movements to be carried out, for already the eastern skies are getting gray."

A half hour longer went by, and, divided into four parties, the command moved slowly down the valley, the detachment of the scout in advance, and consisting of the scouts, trappers, hunters, and a few friendly Indians of the Pawnee tribe.

Unsuspecting evil, the village was lost in deep repose, excepting where here and there a fire-light glimmered, proving that some early hunter was up preparing his humble breakfast before starting on the hunt to provide food for his dusky family.

Silently and ominously the scout led his detachment on until the first wigwams were near at hand; and then, with a burst of prolonged and terrific war-cries, they dashed into the village, spreading terror and consternation around them!

Panic-stricken, the red protectors of the camp rushed forth from their homes, to be shot down instantly, while the cries of frightened squaws and papooses rent the air with heart-rending wails.

Presently the torch was applied, and the flames began to make sad havoc with the village, while the shouts and shots of the party who had attacked the cattle corral were heard mingled with the war-whoops of the Indians and battle-cries of the scout and his men.

In every direction then, scattered hundreds of frightened mustangs, flying through the village and adding new terror to the Indians, while dashing up with his force, Captain Raymond joined in the carnival of battle.

Upon all sides the red warriors fell in defense of their homes, many of them defenseless, for in their confusion they could find no arms, and believing the enemy ten times their real number, they fled in affright to the hillsides and forests, leaving their village in the possession of the pale-faces.

"Now for one grand sweep of destruction, and then, ere daylight is fairly upon us, we will away for Cheo," cried the scout, who seemed to the men to be the very personification of courage, while, after seeing him in battle, the reputation he had won did not surprise them.

Dashing through the village, the scout called a halt, and discovered that, though the enemy had lost scores of warriors killed, only half a

dozen of his men were missing, and with a cheer at their success, away the band dashed up the valley to carry the war into the village of Cheo.

As Prairie Rover had said, the noise of a small waterfall drowned the sound of the attack upon Chota, and ere the surprised Indians were aware of the existence of a pale-face within a hundred miles, the wild, ringing war-whoop of the scout sent a thrill of horror and terror through many a red-skin's heart.

"Give them no time to arm or rally, men! at them with a savage will!" cried Prairie Rover, and a burst of war-cries answered his words, and death held high carnival once more in the home of the red-man.

In the twinkling of an eye, almost, the village was in ruins, the ground strewn with dead warriors, and hundreds of squaws and papooses flying for safety to the hills.

"We have no time to tarry now, as the Dog Soldiers and Cheyennes will be warned and be ready to meet us, so let us press our horses hard, and at once ride down the lower valley."

"All right, scout; you lead, and we will follow. We lost five good men in Cheo; now to avenge them and their comrades who fell at Chota," replied Captain Ramsey Raymond, and with a loud cheer the destroying human whirlwind swept on, the horses dripping with foam and covered with dust, but urged on for life and death.

Notwithstanding an alarm given by some of the fugitives from Cheo, the Dog Soldier Sioux were not prepared to meet their foes, but took safety in flight, leaving their village to fall into the hands of the whites.

A few brave warriors, however, determined to sell their lives dearly, and the death of several troopers was the result; but in compact mass the band rushed on, and the Indian camp was a scene of desolation and death.

A village of savage Cheyennes then fell beneath the anger of the pale-faces, the braves, driven to despair, fighting bravely for their homes, and dropping a number of white horsemen from their saddles.

But the march of the attacking band was irresistible, and their track was one of ruin and bloodshed.

Having captured the village, the scout ordered a retreat to the hills near by, carrying with them large quantities of Indian plunder, loaded upon horses taken from the corral.

Once in the hills, the party halted to rest, and those horses that were broken down were exchanged for the best mustangs captured from the Indians.

Night coming on, strong detachments of guards were stationed against surprise, for that the Indians would attack them, the scout felt assured, if they could rally their different warriors in time.

But, excepting a few stray shots, fired by some prowling brave, the night passed quietly away, and with the first glimmer of the light, the band moved off to continue its work of ruin against the prairie border villages of the redskins.

Then the foresight of the scout, in ordering the shooting of all the mustangs that were not stamped, was seen, for although the Indians had assembled in large numbers to attack the whites, very few of them were mounted, and could not follow upon their trail with sufficient speed to keep them in sight.

By noon the prairie was reached, and the bands of hunting Indians were attacked with irresistible force, before there was a chance of resistance, for they had never looked for danger from pale-faces in that direction, and being some thirty miles distant from the villages of Chota and Cheo, they had not known of the ruin that had fallen upon them.

Another long day of carnage, and satiated with their bloody work, the band of whites struck forth over the prairie, and with weary steps headed for the motte, wherein was situated the ruined outpost.

As the last lingering rays of the setting sun fell from the summit of the distant hills, the scout glanced behind him, and what he discovered proved that the greatest danger of the daring raid of death was yet to be met and overcome.

CHAPTER X.

THE FORLORN HOPE.

The sight that the scout discovered behind him, was one that was calculated to make the stoutest heart quail, for just setting forth from the base of the hills was a confused mass of Indian warriors, some mounted, but mostly on

foot, and directing their course upon the trail of the pale-faces.

Fully outnumbering the band, five to one, and with his animals so jaded that they could hardly be urged faster than a walk, the scout felt that they were compelled to halt for a night's rest in the motte, and that by morning the Indians would have come up and surrounded them, and their only way of escape would be to cut bravely through their lines.

"We are in a hot place, Captain Raymond," laughed the scout, as he pointed toward the hills.

"Yes; but it is no worse than I expected; in fact, we have escaped well, with the loss of only twenty-five poor fellows; but it is owing to your dash and courage, scout, for we were upon the villages before they could resist."

"But what would you advise?"

"To seek the ruined stockade, and prepare ourselves for a fight, for the Indians may attack us to-night."

"If not, we will have had a good night's rest, and thus refreshed, the horses will carry us bravely through their lines, and there are too few of them mounted to cause us much trouble when once we get clear of the motte."

"Yet, infuriated as they are, they may storm us to-night, so we must hasten on and set our house in order for the coming of our guests."

The scout spoke lightly of the danger, but all felt that it was very great, and urging forward their tired steeds the motte was soon reached, and ere darkness came on, the band was strongly fortified in the old stockade.

Contrary to their expectations, the night passed quietly away, and the sun arose to discover no Indian visible.

But creeping from the stockade, the scout bent his way toward the edge of the motte, and after an absence of a half-hour returned, his face showing no sign of discovery to their disadvantage.

"Well, Prairie Rover, what have you seen?" cried Captain Raymond, advancing toward him.

"That we have succeeded most thoroughly in this expedition, captain."

"I know it; and we'll all be lions when we get back."

"If we get back; but I must not delay telling you."

"First, my messenger has informed the Indians who went against the settlements, that their own homes have been visited by the torch and sword, and out upon the prairies, some three miles, is the entire force of Sioux and their allies, who returning in haste were met by the party pursuing us."

"Slowly they are arranging their plans, which are to surround us in our stronghold, and for us to attempt to cut through their lines would be certain death."

"What is to be done, then, scout?" coolly asked the young captain.

"I see but one plan, and that is to stand a siege."

"We have only a week's provisions, and with no chance of succor."

"Horse-flesh is most palatable when one has nothing else, captain."

"But you must stand a siege; the stockade is strong, you have tried men and true, and plenty of ammunition to beat back the entire force of redskins if they were to storm you."

"In four days, or less, I can return with reinforcements from the fort—"

"You!—how will you leave the motte?"

"I'll dash through their lines, which are not formed fully yet, and Comrade can carry me away from their fleetest horses."

"True, he showed no sign of fatigue yesterday, when all of the other horses were fagged out; but there are swift horses in Robin Hood's band."

"Robin Hood and his men are not with the Indians; they have gone off upon some other devilment."

"Now I must be off; remember to keep the courage of the men up, and in four days I will return with troops sufficient to give yonder redskins battle on a field of their own choice."

"I dislike to see you go, for it is a desperate gauntlet you have to run, and I fear evil may befall you."

"It cannot be helped; some one must go, for it is a forlorn hope, and I am best suited for the duty, knowing the country as I do, and having Comrade to sustain me in my trial, for his powers of endurance will be put to the severest test."

"It is a terrible risk to run; but something must be done," said Captain Raymond, as he walked with the scout toward his horse.

Comrade was as fresh as a lark, and as if anticipating some desperate service was expected of him, neighed wildly to be off.

A few moments more and the scout, with determined and stern face, mounted Comrade, and shaking the hand of Ramsey Raymond, rode from the stockade, followed by the good wishes of the band.

Following him to the edge of the motte, Captain Raymond, Lieutenant Hardcastle and a few others, saw at once the desperate gantlet the scout had to run, for the prairie was alive with warriors, mounted and on foot, who were rapidly spreading a human chain around the piece of timber, including both sides of the small river or stream.

To the eastward was a space of half a mile wide, which was not protected, though there were two columns moving toward this point.

To this open space was the distance of a good half mile, and the scout felt that he must ride like the wind to run through ere the two columns closed up.

Darting from the shelter of the motte, Comrade sped on like a bird, and had advanced fortunately one-third of the distance ere he was discovered, and then a yell of fury went up from a thousand red throats as the daring horseman was seen, and his object known.

Rapidly the two columns began to close up, but one being dismounted, the other made better progress.

Heading more toward the Indians on foot the scout with his keen eye at once took in the whole danger and chances of escape, and with a word and gesture urged on Comrade, while he unslung his trusty rifle and held it ready for action.

Becoming warmed to his work, Comrade crept low upon the prairie and fairly flew along, his speed surprising the Indians, and winning cheer after cheer from his friends in the motte, who breathlessly watched the rapid flight.

The whole scene was now one of wildest excitement, the Indians pouring in hundreds toward the point for which the scout was aiming, and filling the air with their terrible yells of hatred.

On, on, on bounded the noble Comrade, nearer and nearer the line he drew, and then only a few hundred yards divided him from the two hostile lines.

Will he make it?

No, certain death stares him in the face. Too bad, too bad! better to have remained and fought it out with us.

By Heavens! that horse fairly flies!

See! see! he will make it—he will! he will! Such were the cries from the men in the motte, as they narrowly watched the progress of the scout, and then a wild yell of joy burst from the timber as they saw Prairie Rover rush in between the two columns, his rifle flashing right and left upon his enemies, who were still two hundred yards distant.

Warrior after warrior fell as the leaden hail was poured into the crowded ranks, but on they pressed, pouring in a shower of rifle-bullets as they came.

As though bearing a charmed life, the scout and his noble steed remained unhurt, dashing across the line, and with a yell from Prairie Rover that was heard at the motte, the flying steed bounded away on the open prairie, followed by a hundred Indian horsemen.

But Comrade was no ordinary steed, and his swift flight soon distanced the smaller mustangs of the warriors, and in an hour had left them far behind, as, unhurt, horse and rider sped on, having successfully escaped in the forlorn hope, and with every chance of soon bringing aid from the fort to rescue Captain Raymond and his gallant band.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PRAIRIE ROBIN HOOD.

UPON the evening of the arrival of the Indian forces in front of the settlement, and when the white renegade chief was planning his attack against his own race, there suddenly darted into the outlaw camp an Indian messenger, his horse showing signs of hard riding, and even his red-skin rider exhibiting in his stern face a look of fatigue.

It was near the sunset hour, and the white chief and his red allies were holding a council of war beneath a huge tree where Robin Hood had halted and made his head-quarters.

The steed, a large, sorrel stallion, with a build denoting extraordinary strength and bottom, was grazing near by, loose, while his bridle, accouterments, and a silver-mounted Mexican

saddle, with its broad horn, lay at the base of the tree.

Leaning against the trunk of the tree, his arms folded upon his broad breast, and his whole attitude one of perfect ease and grace, was the man who had won the name of the Prairie Robin Hood.

Six feet in height, he was of magnificent physique, and beneath the closely-fitting pants of dressed buck-skin, and blue flannel shirt, his form gave indication of great strength, agility, and powers of endurance.

Cavalry boots incased his feet, the tops reaching to his knees, and the heels armed with silver spurs, while upon his head he wore a soft, gray felt hat, looped up upon the left side with a gold arrow, and with a black plume drooping over the brim.

A broad belt encircled his small waist, and upon either hip was a handsomely-mounted revolver, while in front, and ready for the clutch of either hand, were a Bowie-knife and double-barreled pistol of exceeding large bore and fine sight.

Hanging to the belt, upon the left side, and attached by a red silk cord, was a small, gleaming battle-ax, with a long handle, and a weapon which the chief had been known to use with terrible effect in battle.

Having described the general appearance of the noted Robin Hood, his face certainly deserves mention, for it was one that once seen could not be forgotten.

The eyes were as changeable in expression as an April day, being at times cruelly bitter, again savage in their fierceness, and then touchingly sorrowful; but at all times they were restless and searching in their look.

The forehead was high, bold, intellectual, and the dark, iron-gray hair, combed directly back, fell to his shoulders in wavy masses, while his beard, reaching to his belt almost, was also tinged with silver threads, though the face appeared to be that of a man under forty.

The mouth was forbiddingly stern, sneering and cruel, the whole expression that of a man who feared neither God nor human being, and felt that he was an outcast upon the face of the earth.

Years before the man had drifted upon the frontier, coming from the far South-west, it was said, and with a reckless band of a dozen followers at his heels, men like himself, devoting themselves to crime.

At first the chief devoted himself to the life of a highwayman, living in some secret recess of the forest, and demanding toll from all passers through his dominions.

Ever polite to his victims, and most courteous to women, whom he never robbed, and never taking from a man his every cent, he soon won the name of the Prairie Robin Hood.

But at last the military were on his path, the country became aroused at some more daring deed, and he was hunted down, and after a terrible struggle, made prisoner by Colonel Vernon, but not until he had shot three soldiers dead, and was himself severely wounded.

He was tried at once by military court, and sentenced to be hung, as soon as he recovered from his wounds; but the night previous to the day appointed for his execution he escaped from his log prison, and the next morning the sentinel who guarded him was found dead before the door, but without one mark of violence upon him, while upon his face remained a look of mortal terror, as though some unearthly visitation had appeared before him.

A year passed away after the escape of the Robin Hood of the Prairies, and then he suddenly reappears on the border, at the head of a formidable band of renegades, and from that day his cruelty toward his fellow-man seemed to know no bounds, for the armed and the defenseless everywhere fell beneath his deadly hatred.

Such was the Prairie Robin Hood, and one gazing into his face as he leaned with folded arms against the tree, listening to the war-talks of the Indian chiefs, Brave Shield, Big Whistle, and Tall Bull, could not but feel that his dark and handsome face hid beneath its cruel mask some deep and damning mystery of crime and lost honor.

"The chiefs talk like women, and would palaver for hours like a gang of old women at a tea-drinking."

"Let them hold on to their rattling tongues, lest the birds of the woods understand them, and carry the tidings of our coming to the settlers," and Robin Hood spoke in a stern and sneering voice.

"What would our white brother have?" sulkily returned Brave Shield.

"I would have you get your red cutthroats

ready to march upon the settlement with the coming of dark; let the whole band follow in my lead, and I will redder the prairies with the blood of the pale-faces," savagely returned the white chief.

"The great chief speaks well, and his red brothers shall fringe their belts with pale-face scalps, and fill their wigwams with pale-face squaws," said Tall Bull, his eyes gloating in anticipation of his evil designs.

"You lay your accursed and bloody claws upon the head or form of a white woman, and I'll tear with my own hand your scalp from your head," cried the white chief, his eyes flashing fire.

Instantly the Indian warriors were upon their feet, their hands upon their weapons, but, undismayed, Robin Hood stood before them, an evil glitter in his eyes.

"What! has our white brother turned traitor?" asked Big Whistle, after a pause.

"I will never be a traitor to a woman, even though I practice hellish barbarities upon men."

"No, you red devils, I lead you against the settlement to kill and make captive the men, and to carry off what plunder you can; but, so help me the Great Spirit, if one woman, or child, dies by the hand of a red-skin intentionally, I'll turn my renegade bloodhounds upon you, and aid the white warriors in driving you to your haunts."

The Prairie Robin Hood spoke in a tone that proved he was in deadly earnest, and evil looks were going the rounds of the Indians' faces, and a storm was threatening, when suddenly a horseman dashed swiftly into the midst of the party.

"Ha! what brings the Comanche Wild Wolf here now, when he skulked to the prairie when we took the war-paint?" tauntingly said the white chief.

"The Wild Wolf is no skulking dog; he has been on the war-path of the pale-face warriors, and has come to tell his red brothers that the braves from the fort are now laying in ashes their happy villages in the hills."

A yell of terror, of rage and despair, went up from the assembled chiefs at this news; but the stern voice of Robin Hood checked their cries.

"Who is it, my red brothers, that brings this news?

"The stranger chief, a Comanche dog, a friend to the pale-faces."

"The Comanche lies!"

With a yell of fury the Wild Wolf threw himself from the back of his steed and rushed upon the chief, his knife glittering in his hand.

But a dozen strong arms seized and held him back, and powerless he cried:

"Red brothers, the tongue of the Wild Wolf is not crooked; he speaks straight; the pale-faces are now in their happy homes."

"If my red brothers doubt the Wild Wolf, let them bear him back a prisoner, and then burn him at the stake."

The words and manner of the Comanche carried conviction with them, and again almost inhuman yells filled the air, while in hot haste the Indians began to mount, no longer thinking of attacking the settlements while their own homes and families were in danger.

In vain Robin Hood pleaded with them to continue on and devastate the settlement; his words were unheeded, and in a short while the whole band of warriors departed, leaving the angry and disappointed Robin Hood alone with his squadron of renegades.

But, undaunted by the desertion of his allies, the daring chief determined to himself strike a blow against the settlement, and with what plunder he could secure dart back to his stronghold in the hills, distant nearly three days' journey from the fort.

With this determination, he called his men around him, made known his intended plans, and at nightfall the band was upon the move, slowly approaching the happy homes of the hardy pioneers of the frontier.

CHAPTER XII.

SAD TIDINGS.

AFTER having successfully, and unhurt, run the gantlet of his foes, the Prairie Rover continued on for several hours ere he drew rein to give Comrade a rest, which he really needed after his severe ride.

But the mustang was a wiry animal of remarkable endurance, and a few hours served to refresh him greatly, and with renewed vigor he continued on at an easy gait through the long hours of the night, when the scout again made a long halt for food and rest, in a small motte where the grass grew luxuriantly, and where there was a spring of clear, cold water.

Having looked to the wants of Comrade, rubbed him down thoroughly and staked him out to feed upon the juicy grass, the scout broiled some jerked buffalo-meat upon the coals, and spreading his blanket, laid down to rest, and hours passed ere he awoke.

Once more he mounted, and again Comrade's powers were put to the test, and with such good result, that the walls of the fort came in sight ere sunset, and just at twilight he dashed into the stockade citadel, and was welcomed by a loud cheer from the soldiers.

But at a glance Prairie Rover discovered that some important event had transpired, for all was excitement and confusion, and he feared that perhaps Colonel Vernon had lost his life in battle with the Indians, for, whether Wild Wolf had reached the band ere they had attacked the upper settlements, he was not aware.

But his fears upon that score quickly vanished, when an orderly came to conduct him to Colonel Vernon.

The commandant sat in his private room, his face pale and terribly stern; but rising as the scout entered, he said:

"Well, what of your expedition?"

"It was a raid of death, sir, for we destroyed every Indian village in the hills, and more than double our own number of warriors were slain, and with only the loss of twenty-five men, seventeen of whom are soldiers."

"A good report; you have done nobly; but where is Raymond?"

"Besieged in the ruined out-post, colonel, for we were followed closely by the Indians, and with our horses broken down were compelled to rest for the night, and in the morning beheld, not only our foes of the day before, but the bands of Tall Bull, Big Whistle, Brave Shield and other chiefs around us, they having returned to defend their homes."

"Your Indian messenger did his duty well, then; he came to me with your message and then hastened on, and instantly the Indians returned to defend their villages, and I greatly feared for the safety of you all."

"But you say Captain Raymond and seventy-five men are besieged in the old out-post?"

"Yes, sir; it was impossible to cut through the fifteen hundred warriors around us, and I advised the captain to remain and fight it out, while I came on to the fort for aid."

"And you broke through a line which seventy-five men dare not risk!"

"I ride a horse, colonel, that has few equals, and broke the line almost before the Indians knew of my intention," modestly returned the scout, and then he continued:

"Captain Raymond has four day's rations, plenty of ammunition, and a band of brave men, and can doubtless keep the Indians at bay until aid reaches him, and it was for succor that I now have come."

"You shall have it, my friend; three companies shall start at once, and I would spare more, but I have to head a squadron myself to start on a duty of the greatest importance, as my daughter is now a prisoner in the hands of that renegade hound, Robin Hood," and the strong voice of the strong man trembled with emotion.

"Miss Vernon a captive to Robin Hood!

"This is indeed sad tidings; but how did it happen, colonel?" said the scout, deeply moved by the news.

"Well, your messenger, Wild Wolf, it seems, succeeded in sending the Indians back to their hills; but Robin Hood, the bloodthirsty monster, would not return without leaving his mark, and finding out in some way that I was ready for him in the settlements, he made a detour, and by night dashed into our lines, and carried off poor Nina, after which act he was off ere the slightest resistance could be offered."

"When did this happen, colonel?"

"Last night, just before daybreak; I was up in the settlement, and returned not one hour before you did."

"He has then at once gone to his stronghold in the hills; two days' hard riding will take him there, and he has now but a day's start. Cheer up, colonel; call out all your men that you intended for your expedition after him, and with those to go to aid Captain Raymond we will at once start, for the out-post is almost on the trail of the stronghold of the outlaws, and after we have relieved the gallant captain we will decide what is best to be done."

"My friend, you give me hope, and it shall be as you say; but once I sentenced Robin Hood to death; and I have hunted him down for years, so that I dread he will take a terrible revenge upon me now that he has the power, and were we to reach his stronghold I fear he

would slay poor Nina ere I could recover her."

"Then, colonel, leave it to me, and I pledge you that I will rescue Miss Vernon; will you trust me?"

"Certainly, and if man can do it, you are the one."

"But come, you need rest and food ere we leave, so I will order supper, and throw yourself upon my bed and take a nap."

"I am like my horse, colonel, a short rest and a good meal causes us to feel as good as new."

"Comrade is now under the tender mercies of your negro groom, and three hours will be all the rest we need; it is now seven o'clock, so please have the men ready by ten."

So saying, the scout threw himself upon the colonel's couch and almost instantly was fast asleep, to awake at the appointed hour, partake of a hearty meal, and at the head of three hundred troopers, under the leadership of Colonel Vernon, ride forth to the aid of the besieged band in the ruined out-post on the river.

CHAPTER XIII.

RAISING THE INDIAN SIEGE.

TRUE to his word to Captain Raymond, the scout was but a few miles from the out-post on the evening of the fourth day.

Having made charge after charge upon the stockade, and with no successful result to themselves, the Indians had laid a regular siege to the gallantly-defended stockade, intending to pick off with their arrows and rifles every man they could catch sight of by day or night, so that by thus reducing the defending force, they could in the end make one grand charge and carry the works.

Well knowing that the scout would bring relief for the out-post, they still believed it would be a week ere he could possibly return, and then only with a comparatively small force, for they did not think, with the settlement threatened, he could get many men to accompany him, and their own large numbers rendered them exceedingly brave.

But they had not counted on the power of endurance and speed of Comrade, or the dash and determination of the troopers, and upon the fourth day were little dreading an attack from any quarter, when suddenly, with a round of hearty cheers, the cavalry were upon them, for, depending on their large numbers for protection, they had stationed no sentinels, as every smaller force invariably does.

Right and left rode the gallant troopers, their rifles and revolvers crackling, and sabers falling with terrible execution, and appearing a far larger force in the darkness, the Indian warriors were seized with a panic and broke in wild confusion, followed hither and thither in their flight by the victorious troopers.

Then into the motte dashed the scout, Colonel Vernon and his escort, and loud and long were the cheers that went up from the stockade when they greeted their friends, and the defenders of the little fort dragged Prairie Rover from his horse and bore him around on their shoulders in triumph.

"Well, captain, I kept my word, and thank God I was able to do so," modestly said the scout.

"We certainly thank God that you were, my friend, for I have lost forty men, killed and wounded, and ere long the end would have been a massacre; but how you must have ridden!" and Ramsay Raymond warmly grasped the scout's hand.

"Colonel Vernon," said Prairie Rover, then turning to that officer, "the Indians have fled to their ruined villages to protect their families, for they evidently believe your force double what it is, and think you are coming after them."

"Now, men fight with desperation around their heartstones, and thus would the redskins fight, were you to attack them; which to do would be madness on your part."

"What would you suggest, scout?"

"That you return with your command at once to the fort—"

"Pardon me, but have you forgotten that my daughter is a captive in the hands of that wicked man, Robin Hood?" reproachfully said Captain Vernon.

"No, sir; it is ever in my mind, and my advice is offered after matured thought on my part; return to the fort with your men, and you will thereby gain a good start ere the Indians know your intention, for if they were to follow you on your retreat many a brave soldier would lose his life."

"Regarding the release of Miss Vernon, were

you to follow on to the stronghold of Robin Hood, certain defeat would be the result, for the Indians would take your trail and you would be between two fires, and it is impossible for three thousand men, even, to openly attack the outlaw retreat with success; what strategy can do is another matter."

"Now, I have said that we have met before, and we have, for in following a certain trail, the whole aim of my life, I have worn many disguises, and once you entertained me at the fort in a garb you little believed covered an impostor; but of that we will not now speak."

"In disguise, suffice it to say, I have also visited the outlaw stronghold, and know it as well as does its chief, and therefore I am capable of acting with my eyes open."

"Leave all to me, return to the fort, and keep a close watch against surprise, and allow me to seek the robber stronghold, and I will rescue from captivity your daughter."

"Will you place full faith in me, Colonel Vernon?"

"Scout, you are a marvelous man, and, I believe, will accomplish what you promise."

"Believe me, I trust you, and will do as you wish; but, for God's sake, save my poor Nina, for a father begs it of you to save his child."

"I have promised," replied the scout, and a few moments after he was hard at work rubbing down his faithful steed and companion, and feeding him upon the most luxuriant grass that could be found.

A substantial supper, a sleep of an hour, and the Prairie Rover moved out from the motte with the returning troopers, but once on the prairie, he bade farewell to Colonel Vernon and his companions, and set forth, alone, in a western direction to soon disappear from sight in the darkness, bound upon the hazardous mission of rescuing from the outlaw stronghold the lovely Nina Vernon, and, strange as it may seem, none in that band were there who for a moment doubted but that his adventure would be crowned with success, for the scout had never been known to fail in anything which he had undertaken.

Hence, with somewhat quieted minds, both Colonel Vernon and Captain Ramsay Raymond set forth upon their return to the fort.

CHAPTER XIV.

WITHIN THE STRONGHOLD.

WHEN the Prairie Robin Hood had determined upon his course regarding the settlement, he started at once to carry out his plan, but was warned by the arrival of an Indian scout that the upper settlements in the valley were prepared to resist him, aided as they were by a number of troops under Colonel Vernon.

Instantly the face of the chief became radiant with cruel joy, and his orders to move rang out quick and stern.

Making a large detour from the settlements he suddenly darted at the speed of his horses in the direction of the fort, and in the stillness and darkness of night dashed within the line of settlers' homes and pounced upon the home of Colonel Vernon.

Awakened from a sound sleep, Nina Vernon and her aunt suddenly discovered the tall form of the outlaw leader before them and heard his stern order:

"Miss Vernon, you will dress with great haste and accompany me."

In vain were the offer of bribes and earnest entreaties. Nina Vernon was compelled to obey, and with trembling hands and blanched face dressed herself in her riding-suit, and the next moment was riding by the side of the chief, as he rapidly rode away, followed by his band fully a hundred in number.

It was a hard and cruel ride of three days, and none but a sturdy frontier girl could have borne the fatigue; but Nina kept up bravely, and upon the evening of the third day following her capture, the hill country was reached, and in a deep recess of the highlands was found the robber encampment.

Rude in construction, hidden away in a lovely valley; defended on one side by lofty and impassable highlands, and upon the other by a mighty flowing stream, the robber retreat was yet more picturesque, and the beauty of the scenery could not but charm Nina, worn out and sorrowful though she was.

Humble cabins, skin wigwams, and a few tents scattered along the river bank composed the homes of the renegade crew and the almost as wicked women and children who followed their fortunes; but, in a fairy-like dell, under the shadow of the highlands, and with a lawn sloping down to the banks of a tiny stream, was

a spacious and comfortable cabin, the home of the chief, and hither was poor Nina borne.

With surprise, as she entered the cabin home, she noted the comforts around her, the humble but easy furniture, the clean flooring, neat walls adorned with crayon and water-color sketches, and a guitar lying near the window, which opened upon a wide piazza around which clung vines, evidently trained to grow there by some one of refined taste.

Across the open hallway from the room into which the chief had ushered Nina, was another room, which appeared like a dining-hall, while back of it were two bed-chambers, as the maiden could see through the open doors, the linen in which was white and clean.

Surprised at all she saw around her, Nina turned and glanced timidly into the face of the man, who, with all his crimes, had certainly treated her with marked respect, and seeing her look, he said quietly:

"Miss Vernon, here shall be your home until I decide regarding your future fate, and no one shall intrude upon you; yes, one will be your companion, whom you will not, I hope, object to, and your wishes shall be attended to by my servants."

"Make yourself at home, please, even though you are beneath the roof of the outlaw chief, called the Prairie Robin Hood."

With a bow worthy of a man in polite society, the chief departed, and Nina was left to brood over her sorrows alone, and to worry her mind with devising some means of escape from her thrall.

"I must escape from here, or ruin will be my fate."

"Have no fear of evil, for you are safe," said a sweet voice near at hand, and turning quickly Nina beheld before her a young girl of wondrous beauty, who had silently entered the room.

"Thank you—oh, thank you, for those words, for you would not deceive a helpless girl," cried Nina, and springing forward she buried her face on the young girl's shoulder, for at last her strong will had broken down, and she was no longer the proud, defiant woman she had been in the presence of the robber chief.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MISSIONARY PRIEST.

UPON the afternoon following the arrival of Nina, in the stronghold of Robin Hood and his band, and near the sunset hour, a horseman was slowly wending his way in the direction of the robber retreat.

His horse seemed tired out, and travel-stained, and the rider wore a look of fatigue, as if he had journeyed many long, weary miles.

The form of the horseman was tall and manly, though the effect of his fine physique was destroyed beneath the humble garb of a Roman Catholic priest, and in spite of the heat of the sun he wore the cap of his order.

The face of the priest was clean-shaven, and the hair cut short; but, notwithstanding, its every feature was good, and in the expression of the eyes and mouth there was a look of fearlessness and determination, which the sanctity of his calling had not wholly destroyed.

Upon the front of his worn saddle was a revolver and knife, ready to protect life in case of necessity, and behind the saddle was a blanket and a leather roll containing the provisions for food, and his book of prayers.

Following the plain trail leading to the hills, the priest soon came upon a small stream, where his horse halted for water, just as the sound of hoofs were heard, and the next instant up dashed a steed and rider.

With surprise the priest beheld a young girl, well mounted, and apparently a thorough horsewoman, for upon discovering him she wheeled her steed quickly to the right-about, as if to fly from danger; but discovering at a glance his peaceful calling, she halted and advanced slowly toward him, saying, in strangely sweet tones:

"Holy father, at first your presence startled me; but now I fear you not."

"Thanks, my daughter; I would not willingly cause one so pure and good as you look to fear me."

"I am an humble follower in the footsteps of my Savior, and am seeking to convert the heathen in this God-forsaken land; but what do you here?"

"I live further up the valley, and thither you must accompany me, for, even in our rude camp, there are those who will be glad to see you, and have you confess their sins, for they are indeed sinful."

"Daughter, it is my duty to go where I can be of service to my fellow-creatures."

"I will accompany you."

Side by side the two rode on together, and ere the sun sunk to rest behind the hills, they arrived in the robber camp.

Leading the way directly toward the cabin of the chief, they soon arrived in front of the door, and the maiden called out to the Prairie Robin Hood, who was seated upon the piazza indolently smoking a huge meerschaum pipe.

"Father, I have brought a guest home with me."

"In God's name, Maud, who have you there?" somewhat angrily said the chief, rising and aiding the maiden to alight.

"I have one who will be a vision of comfort to many poor souls in this camp who desire to confess their evil deeds."

"Always doing some act to incur my displeasure, child."

"No, sir, I have done nothing to cause you to speak thus; this worthy priest I found by the brook and brought home with me."

"Father Foley, this is my father, the chief of the outlaw band, and the man who is known as the Robin Hood of the Prairie."

"I have heard of you, my son, and of your wicked career; but as there was repentance for the thief on the cross, so there may—"

"Hark ye, sir priest! you come here as my daughter's guest, and I will respect the pledge; but I warn you to keep your preaching for ears better attuned to it than are mine."

"Dismount, sir, and your wants shall be attended to, and my word for it you will not refuse a good glass of brandy that I can offer you."

"A little wine for the stomach's sake, my son, is good—"

"Yes, and for your stomach's sake, you men of the cloth will go a great way; come, my man, dismount, and together we will have many a social chat, but, mind you, none of your Christian doctrines for me, for I am outlawed by God and man, and want none of them."

"Here, Henderson, take the priest's horse, and see that he is cared for, and let the men and women know that we have a lamb in our flock of wolves, should they wish to get absolution for their sins, and thus, with the record rubbed out, commence anew to burn, pillage and murder."

Speaking thus bitterly, the chief strode away, while the maiden, whom Robin Hood had called Maud, led the priest into the house and set before him a hearty supper, which the holy father partook of with evident relish.

A week passed away, and still the worthy priest lingered at the robber camp, and he had become a great favorite with all who went to him for comfort and absolution.

With the chief, Father Foley had little to do, for having informed him that his church sent him out among the heathen savages, and that, unmolested, by any of them, he had roamed for years among the tribes, he seemed to rather avoid Robin Hood.

"You certainly have not run loose among the tribes of my acquaintance, my worthy disciple, or they'd have raised the short hair on your head, short as it is, if they would have had to apply to the Indian agency for tweezers to tear it off with."

"Why, man, they would scalp your master, the Pope, and think no more of it than your cloth do of mingling your prayers with whisky."

After this conversation Father Foley seemed to shun the chief, who was really constantly engaged in the duties of his command.

But what surprised the priest most was the presence of the beautiful Maud in that robber retreat, and her calling Robin Hood by that sacred name of Father.

That she was his daughter was evident, for there was a strong likeness between them, only the maiden's face wore none of the stern and hard expressions that flitted across her parent's, and her life seemed one of perfect purity.

True, she seemed sad at times, for she keenly felt her father's terrible life and the dangers he ran daily, but then she was ever affectionate and cheerful before him, and seemed the silver lining upon his clouded existence, the single ray of sunlight that entered his gloomy heart, for he was wholly wrapped up in his beautiful daughter, whom he had taught himself in various branches of education, until Maud was a refined, intelligent and accomplished young lady, devoting her leisure hours to drawing, painting and music, for she was a fine performer upon the guitar, and possessed a voice of marvelous richness and power.

Was it a wonder then that the priest felt a deep interest in the maiden, and still lingered at the stronghold, anxious to win the fair young

girl from her cruel associations, and cause her father to allow her to seek a home in a society which she could adorn?

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RESCUE.

ONE pleasant afternoon, ten days after the arrival of the priest in the robber camp, three persons were seated upon horseback upon the side of a small hill, gazing out upon the prairie spread out before them with almost boundless expanse.

Two of the parties were maidens, one of them, Maud, the robber chief's daughter, the other Nina Vernon.

The third person was the priest, Father Foley, who was allowed every privilege in the camp, and had accompanied the young ladies for a ride upon the prairie.

After gazing a while in silence upon the level landscape, the priest turned to Maud and said, quietly:

"Lady, I have to thank you for more kindness than I can ever repay, but you will have your own reward."

"Through your kindness I have been received in the robber camp of your father, and thereby enabled to accomplish the object for which I came here."

"Listen, while I tell you why I came and make known to you that I have deceived you, that I am not what I seem."

Surprise was visible upon the beautiful face of Maud, but she merely bowed for the priest to continue, and said nothing.

A slight flush overspread the face of Father Foley, and he resumed in the same soft and pleasant voice in which he had before spoken:

"Many miles from here there lives a man who is your father's enemy; an enemy because in the discharge of military duties, he once condemned your parent to die for his crimes; pardon me, but I must speak plainly."

"That foe of your father has a pleasant home, almost within the shadow of the post, and there dwelt his sister and daughter in peace and happiness, until the renowned Robin Hood of the Border swooped down upon the dove-cot in revenge, and bore the maiden away, his intention being to force the commandant of the fort to feel his revenge by putting the maiden to death."

"Could my father do so foul a deed? He never wars against women," indignantly replied the maiden.

"True, he has that redeeming trait; but he is bitter in his love for revenge, and the life of Miss Vernon was to be sacrificed to avenge himself upon the father for having once condemned him to die upon the gallows, and from which ignominious doom you, his daughter, rescued him."

"Me! How know you this, Father Foley?"

"I know that you played ghost and frightened the poor superstitious Irish sentinel, who guarded your father, to death, and that you bravely rescued your Robin Hood from his doom, although in years you were then a mere child; also, I know that last night your father gave the order for the murder of Miss Vernon, and that her scalp was to be sent to the post."

"Horrible! This shall not be done, sir priest; you have my word for it," replied Maud, her face paler, and her eyes flashing fire.

"Lady, I know your influence is great, but I prefer not to risk it."

"I said I was deceiving you, and in truth I am, for I am no priest."

"What! who then are you?" cried Maud, in amazement.

"I am one whom you have once met before; one who gave chase to you some days since, when we met in the motte to the southward."

"You are, then, that man? Well, I distanced you, did I not, although your horse was a fleet one? But how you are disguised!"

"It would not be safe for the Prairie Rover to visit this spot."

"The Prairie Rover? You, then, are that man? Oh! how I have longed to see you, for I love to hear of your daring deeds."

"Prairie Rover, you are a brave man, and I am so glad you are not a priest," and Maud's face flushed crimson, and her eyes drooped as she made the remark.

Then she quickly continued:

"But what danger you are in here: quick! fly! ere my father knows you in your true light."

"Lady, I pledged my word to Colonel Vernon to rescue his daughter, and I came hither for that purpose, and Miss Vernon has known me in my true light since the first night I arrived, for her woman's eye penetrated a disguise which

none of the band have done; although they have often met me.

"When I asked you to ride hither this afternoon, it was for the purpose of escaping with Miss Vernon; but let me urge that you also come with us, for sooner or later the end must come, and you will be cast helpless upon the world."

"Yes, Maud, let me beg you to come with us, and be my sister, and my father will be a father to you."

"No one need know that you are the daughter of the noted Robin Hood, for my father will willingly resign and return East, if I wish it; and then he will have two daughters instead of one."

"Come, Maud. Come with me," and Nina put her arms affectionately round her beautiful companion, who trembled like an aspen leaf, and great tears stood in her eyes.

"No, I will not be tempted. I will remain. I long dearly to see the great world beyond, to meet my fellow-men and women whose brows are not branded with crime, but I owe my first duty to my father."

"Whatever he may be to others, cold and stern though is his nature, to me he has been ever kind, and I know that I am all he has to love in the world."

"I am glad that we have met, Nina, and you, sir, I can never forget; but I must stay here with my father."

"Quick! hasten! for you have no time to lose would you keep ahead of the human bloodhounds that ere long will be on your trail; so fly at once; and, Nina, take my mare; she is the fleetest on the prairie, and the scout rides one that has few equals, so you can have a better chance of escape; no, no, do not say me nay, but change horses with me at once," and the noble girl sprung to the ground.

"It is best, Miss Vernon," replied the disguised scout, and he instantly set about changing the saddles and bridles upon the horses, while the two maidens seemed almost heartbroken at parting, Maud because her friend, whom she had learned to love so dearly, was perhaps forever going from her, and Nina to have to leave behind, amid a robber's camp, the beautiful girl whom she so longed to have go with her.

"Miss Maud, and now we must part."

It was the scout who spoke, and his voice was sad and tremulous.

Maud said nothing. Her form trembled, and tears chased each other down her cheek.

"Yes, we must part now, but only for awhile, for I will return if you say so; I will again come into the robber's camp, in some disguise or other, to see you; for never will I give you up until you bid me go from you."

The maiden raised her beautiful eyes, gave one searching look into the face before her, and replied softly:

"You must not risk your life, but I long so much to see you again."

"Say I can come, and my desire to see you will prevent me from risking my life."

"You can come."

As the maiden answered, and before the scout could reply, she suddenly started back, her face paling, and her lips parting, with "All is lost! See! there comes my father!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A TERRIBLE CONFSSION.

It was too true! coming slowly around the base of the hill, and some two hundred yards distant, was the Robin Hood of the Border, following the trail leading to his retreat in the hills.

As the eyes of all three fell upon the majestic form of the robber chief, there suddenly came the sharp crack of a rifle from some unseen foe, a loud war-cry, and throwing his arms wildly in the air, Robin Hood reeled in his saddle and fell heavily to the ground.

The war-cry heard was echoed by a wild scream from Maud, and together the three dashed down the hill toward the fallen man.

But suddenly from a dark covert on the hill-side darted a tall and wild-looking form, and with the speed of an antelope rushed toward the prostrate chief.

"Great God! it is Wild Wolf," cried the scout, and he drove the spurs into Comrade and urged him on, at the same time calling out to the Indian.

But wrapped up in the joy of his revenge, the Indian warrior neither saw nor heard—his victim only was before him.

"God in heaven! he will scalp him before the eyes of his daughter," cried the scout, and he half drew his revolver from its holster; but, as

if altering his determination, he urged Comrade on, and the next instant bounding to the ground seized Wild Wolf as he was bending over the wounded man to take his scalp.

"Hold! Wild Wolf; I bid you hold!" sternly cried the scout, as the Indian seemed inclined to rush upon the wounded chief.

"Wild Wolf has killed the hound of the prairie; let him take his scalp."

"No; yonder comes the daughter of this man, and she shall see him die in peace, for you have taken his life."

"Will you yield this to me, or shall the knife be drawn between us?" and the scout spoke with deadly firmness.

"Wild Wolf has no knife for the heart of his white brother."

"The Prairie Rover must not be angry with his red brother."

"The Prairie Rover! are you the one whom men call the Prairie Rover?"

It was the deep voice of the robber chief, and quickly the scout turned toward him.

"Yes, chief; I came hither in the disguise of a priest to take from your power the daughter of Colonel Vernon; but here comes your poor daughter and she will explain all," replied the scout, and on dashed Maud, followed by Nina.

"My father! oh, God! he is dying!" and Maud threw herself beside him.

"Yes, Maud, I am dying; I feel that my moments are numbered."

"And here stands your murderer—"

"Hold! lady, yonder man has but avenged himself for a wrong done him in years gone by; nay, put up your pistol, for he is my friend, and I will not see him harmed."

The scout spoke firmly, and glancing into his face, she relinquished her hold upon the weapon she had drawn from her belt, and again knelt beside her father.

"Maud, daughter, I have been to you a cruel father, for I have reared you here amid wild scenes of carnage; but I feel that you will forgive me, and when you hear my confession you will think kindly of me."

"Father, oh! father, who else have I to love?

"Oh, God! must he be taken from me thus, and I be left all alone in the world?"

"We all have our time to die, Maud, and the hand of death is upon me now; sooner or later his icy touch will still your pulse."

"But, as I stand upon the brink of the grave, as I cast a bitter glance of retrospection over the past, I'd have you hear my history; nay, turn not your eyes in hatred upon yonder poor, untutored child of the forest; for in years gone by he was a sufferer by my hand, all he loved was torn from him by my ruthless followers, so he only carried out the instinct of his nature, and in revenge took my life."

"I would not have died thus; but vain are human hopes and regrets now for me, and it may be best; for strange as it may seem, I feel now no enmity toward my fellow-men, and thank God, I die ere my crime-stained soul was stained with the blood of yonder innocent maiden."

"Thank you, scout; hold me thus, and I suffer less pain from this wound through which my life is fast ebbing away."

"Maud, long years ago, ere you was born, I was an innocent man, a wild youth perhaps, but still not sinful."

"Then across my life there came a cloud, a damning cloud; for betrayed by one whom I believed most true, one of kindred blood, we fought, and he fell by my hand."

"But, there my sorrows only began, for my act cast me out from a mother's love, nay, from the affection of every human being, save one, and her I learned to love with my whole heart."

"That one, Maud, was your mother, who, when I first met her, was engaged to another, a noble man, who would have made her life happy had I not darkened her path."

"Finding I was disinherited by my mother, and with no one to speak a kind word to me, I intended turning my back upon my home, when I discovered I was loved by your mother, and I could not leave without her to guide my wandering footsteps through life."

"But, alas! more bloodshed fell to my lot, for the man to whom she was engaged sought me out, challenged me, and we met upon the fatal field of honor."

"He fell by my hand, and ere I could reach the spot where he lay bleeding, a horseman dashed up and furiously attacked me."

"It was the brother of your mother, Maud."

"In vain was it that I warned him off, and to keep him at bay shot his horse; he rushed upon

me, firing as he came, and in self-defense I shot him through the heart."

"Oh, God have mercy upon you."

"His mercy will never fall on me, Maud. Yes, he fell by my hand, and then I fled the hated home where I had passed my boyhood years."

"But, with me went the woman of my love, your mother, Maud."

"Hunted down for the crimes I had committed, I fled to Mexico, and became a wanderer, to roam into this portion of the country where your mother, ever true to me, followed with you, then a mere child."

"One night the military visited my house, accompanied by a band of settlers, and in the skirmish that followed, for I would not submit tamely, your mother was killed."

"From that day, I became a very devil, and well you know my career since."

The chief paused, and the deep voice of the scout asked:

"Was the mother of this young girl your wife?"

"She was; we were married in New Orleans."

"Thank God! Ernest Maltravers, I forgive you all the sorrow that you have caused me."

"Who is it that calls the name of Ernest Maltravers?" cried the chief, his face flushing, as he raised himself upon his elbow, and peered searching into the face of the scout.

"One whom you believed you had slain, Ernest Maltravers."

"I am Percy Le Roy!"

"God, I thank thee; I am not bowed down by that crime in my dying hour," and the chief fell back with a groan.

"And you forgive me, Percy Le Roy?"

"Yes, I forgive you from my heart, Ernest Maltravers, though since my recovery from the fearful wound you gave me, I have been on your track, seeking revenge."

"I tracked you to Mexico, and I trailed you hither, yet only a few days since did I find that you were he that was called the Robin Hood of the Border, for you were young then, and you have changed greatly since last we met."

"When, by accident, I found that Robin Hood was none other than Ernest Maltravers, it pained me most deeply, for I had a tie awakening in my heart that destroyed my intended revenge against you, and bound me to you with a bond I hope will not be severed."

"And that tie is?" sadly said the chief, his eyes closing.

"Your daughter! Ernest Maltravers, you are dying; your sands of life are well-nigh run out, and this child will be alone in the world."

"Leave her to my charge, and in the family of Colonel Vernon she will find a home until she is willing to become my wife, for I love her as dearly as I once did her mother, and in her face I see the look of Ruth Reginald."

"Maud, my child, the man before you I once did a great wrong; he forgives me all the sorrow I have caused him, and, if in your heart there is a bond of feeling that will awaken into love, take him, and for my sake be a noble wife to him, for he is a noble man."

"Father, your wish will be my law; but is there no hope, no thought that you may recover, and in the future lead a different life, free from these wild scenes?" and Maud bent her lips and pressed them to her father's brow.

"Child, I have not half an hour to live; already clouds of death pass before my eyes, and I feel—that—but you forgive me, do you not, Le Roy—and you—my child, you forgive your erring father; but do not—do not forget him, even though he was a cruel Robin Hood of the Border—

"Here, child, take my hand; and you, Le Roy, take my other hand, and—oh, God! bless these two, even though my memory be forever accursed!"

The lustrous eyes were closed from view, the strong form trembled, a sigh parted the stein lips, and Ernest Maltravers, the man whose life had been one long scene of crime, ceased to breathe.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

In the commandant's pleasant rooms at the fort, one delightful afternoon, some ten days after the death of Ernest Maltravers, the Robin Hood of the Border, sat Colonel Vernon and Percy Le Roy, earnestly discussing the stirring incidents of the past few weeks.

When the colonel had heard the whole story of the scout's adventure as a priest in the robber camp, and his return to the fort, after the death of the chief, accompanied by Maud and Nina, he said, with feeling:

"Thank God! all is over now, and there is some prospect that our lives may glide quietly along in the future."

"To you, Le Roy, I owe more than I can ever repay, for you have saved me my child, who is far dearer to me than life itself."

"You have been a great sufferer, my friend, but, 'let the dead past bury its dead,' and all will be well."

"Now I wish you to meet my sister, Miss Vernon, whose early life was also clouded, causing her to leave gay society, and accompany me to this far frontier, where she has been a mother to Nina—oh, here she comes now."

As the colonel spoke, a lady entered the room, a lady of perhaps forty years of age, and with a sad face that once had been beautiful.

"Lida, I send for you on account of joyous news—but in God's name what ails you?"

"Brother, from Nina I have heard all, and that the Robin Hood of the Border was Ernest Maltravers, the man who killed his cousin Howard, to whom I was engaged, you remember?"

"Yes, I recall vividly that sad affair; but, Lida, this is my friend, Captain Le Roy, who has won such a wonderful reputation as the Prairie Rover; and whose daring has restored to us our lost Nina."

Kind reader, a few more words and my romance of border life is ended, with the hope that it has served to interest you in the lives of those who have gone far beyond the marts of civilization, to build up new homes and new associations, in the midst of a savage land.

A few days' rest at the fort, and the scout and Captain Raymond started upon another expedition, accompanied by a large force of troopers.

It was against the stronghold of the robber band, who in the continued absence of their chief, for they knew not his fate, had been thrown into disorder and strife.

Taking advantage of his thorough knowledge of the surroundings, the scout led the column slowly to a night attack, and the surprise and defeat of the renegade robbers was thorough, and their band was scattered to the four winds of the prairie.

Returning by the way of the Indian village, the dashing command inflicted another severe punishment upon the hostile tribes, who at once became anxious to sue for peace with the whites, a peace which was soon after entered upon, but like all treaties between the red-men and pale-faces, only kept until some trifling circumstances called them to bury the tomahawk once more.

Returning in triumph to the fort, Percy Le Roy, as he is now known to be, received a warm welcome from Maud, who closely questioned him regarding every feature of the stronghold, which so long had been her home, and with tears in her eyes, thanked him sincerely when he said he had transferred her father's body to her favorite little dell near the cabin, and had marked the grave with an engraved headboard, containing her father's real name, age, and date of death.

For his gallant service, Ramsey Raymond was promoted to the rank of major, and further made happy by discovering that he was really loved by the sad little coquette, Nina Vernon, who had given him so many heartaches.

A few months passed away in peace and contentment at the fort, and then the cabin-home of Colonel Vernon became the scene of a joyous double wedding, for Nina had consented to make Ramsey Raymond's heart glad by becoming his wife, and between Maud Maltravers and Percy Le Roy there were

"Two souls with but a single thought—
Two hearts that beat as one."

It was a quiet, but joyous wedding, and among the distinguished guests present, was most conspicuous in his gorgeous trappings and war-paint, Wild Wolf, the Comanche chief, who, when the benediction was given, signified his joy and congratulations by a war-whoop which nearly raised the roof of the cabin, and started the echoes in the forest for miles around.

Tired of the stirring scenes of wild western life, the happy couples were anxious to find homes in a more civilized land, and upon the banks of the Mississippi river, within view of the spire of the new church, erected by the will of Mrs. Maltravers, who had so cruelly condemned her son unheard, they now live in contentment, both Percy Le Roy and Ramsey Raymond having settled down to the quiet en-

joyment of a planter's life, perfectly happy in the love of their beautiful wives, and the young generation growing up around them, and who, with open-mouthed wonder, listen over and over again to the daring exploits of the Prairie Rover, little dreaming, in their innocent hearts, that a "skeleton" lies hidden behind the scenes of the romantic story of border life.

THE END.

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